REGISTRATION AND OTHER STORIES

Registration And Other Stories

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Contents

My Two Hosts
KANG CHUO 1

Blast Furnace
LU CHI 29

New Times, New Methods
KU YU 45

Registration
CHAO SHU-LI 55

Yin Ching-chun
HAN FENG 93

On the Kholchin Grasslands
MALCHINKU 121

Ahmad and Pakya
WANG YU-HU 143

I Want to Study!
KAO YU-PAO 169

Ehdun Maole and Snow White
HUO CHIEN 195

Sacrifice to the Kitchen God
CHIN CHAO-YANG 217

My Two Hosts

by Kang Chuo

Kang Chuo, a native of Hsiangyin County in Hunan Province, was born in 1920. His father was an intellectual, who early influenced his son's love for new literature.

In 1937, after the outbreak of the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression, Kang Chuo went to the countryside to mobilize the people. In 1938, he enrolled at the Literature Department of Lu Hsun Arts' Institute in Yenan, the then revolutionary centre. Later he went to Shansi as a war correspondent and worked for many years among peasants in the liberated areas. He started writing in 1941. Among his published works are collections of short stories like "My Two Hosts," "A Young Intellectual in the Countryside," and "Worker Chang Fei-hu." In addition to short stories, tales for children, essays and adaptations of folk tales, he has also written a novel "A Tale of the Hehshihpo Mine."

I was preparing to move from Lower Village to Upper Village. On the eve, I had been to Upper Village to take a look at my new lodging. The room allotted to me was in a roadside house in the western part of the village. The owner of the house was an old man named Chen Yun-nien.

On my return to Lower Village, Shuan-chu, from whom I was moving, asked me how I had liked the new place and offered to accompany me there on the morrow. I thanked him for his offer, but declined it:

"I haven't got many things, and a cadre like you is a busy man. Since the winter school has just opened, you had better go about your own work."

But he insisted, "It's only about five *li*[1] away! I'm

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1 One *li* is equal to 0.3107 mile.

going to the fair tomorrow so we can go together. I've practically got everybody to agree to attend the winter school. So it doesn't matter if I go away for a while." Shuan-chu would not listen to my objections.

The next day, he helped me put my things on his donkey and we started out along the river bank.

It was early winter and the day was fine. It was warm in the sun. The shallow river was crusted with a thin layer of ice. Where the ice had melted, the water flowed gently and its babbling reminded one of the tinkling of tiny brass bells. We were not the only ones on the way to the fair, but the others had all gone ahead of us. Shuan-chu and I were walking slowly, chatting away. He was not paying much attention to the donkey. The animal, a she-ass, was quite clever. She was walking slowly in front of us. Sometimes she would stick out her muzzle to gnaw at the withered grass by the roadside, sometimes she would turn her head to stare at us, as if to tell us she was waiting for us. It was only when Shuan-chu shouted "gee-up, gee-up" that the donkey would quicken her step, although before long she would again slow down her pace.

My former host talked almost all the time about his studies. He said he was very unhappy about my moving away from him.

"From now on, it will be really hard for me to study. Where can I find such a good teacher like you?"

"In studies, it's the pupil himself that counts," I replied, "besides, you're on your feet now, you'll be able to make out all right by yourself."

Then he said he would come and visit me, and asked me not to forget him and to teach him just as patiently as I had done in the past. He told me that he still found it difficult to read the *Shansi-Chahar-Hopei Daily*, and reminded me of the request he had made some time back.

"Don't forget to buy me a pocket dictionary, Lao Kang! Please keep that in mind!"

"I won't forget it!"

"Ah, if I could only have a dictionary!" he murmured as if to himself, and, looking at me, patted me on the shoulder.

Shuan-chu and other young villagers had once seen a pocket dictionary in the director's office of the district branch of the National Salvation Youth League and heard the director dwell on the usefulness of such a dictionary. Since then, almost all the villagers taking part in the literacy courses were always talking about this dictionary. But we were then blockaded by the enemy. To help my pupils, I did everything to find such a dictionary, but in vain. I could not find an old copy of the dictionary even in government organizations. Some of my colleagues once had such dictionaries, but they had either lost them in the counter-attack against the Japanese or given them to cadres of peasant origin.

On the way we met a man with a jackass. Our donkey and the jackass evidently felt attracted by each other, and began to jostle each other. Pulled aside by his owner, the jackass craned his neck and began to bray. Shuan-chu also rushed to lead his donkey away, and we continued our journey. For a long while, we both remained silent. Suddenly, Shuan-chu chuckled. Nudging me gently, his eyes gleaming slyly, he asked me,

"Lao Kang, have you a girl friend?"

"I...I.... What makes you ask this?" Realizing what he meant, I felt blood rushing to my face. I hastened to add, "I suppose you have a sweetheart?"

"No, no, not yet!" Shuan-chu turned crimson and avoided my eyes, although he smiled. Then he geehawed playfully at the donkey. It was then that I noticed he was wearing a new cotton-padded jacket and a pair

of lined trousers instead of the worn-out cotton-padded pants. On his legs were trimly wound puttees and around his waist a belt which he had received when fighting at the front with the regular army in the Hundred-Regiment Campaign;[1] his head was tied with a new white towel. There must have been a special reason for him to dress his best. He was twenty-two, one year my senior. And according to rural customs, he had reached the marriageable age. He was probably going to meet his sweetheart. With these thoughts flashing in my mind, I seized him by the shoulder,

"Shuan-chu, you have a sweetheart, and you are keeping me in the dark!..."

"No, no, nothing of the kind!" He blushed.

Cracking his whip, he drove the donkey far ahead of us. "Hurry up, hurry up..." he mumbled. "Look, we've almost arrived! Let's walk faster!"

We were soon in Upper Village. I set about putting my room in order. When I came out to take my things from the back of the donkey, I saw that Shuan-chu was fidgeting. He was about to bring my things in, but was hesitating. Yet when I tried to do this myself, he anticipated me. It looked as though he had been struggling with himself whether or not to enter the house. Stealing a glance at the house, he finally helped me bring the things in.

"Oh, you are here!" exclaimed my new host's old wife. Her feet were bound and she hobbled into my room with a broom in her hand, quickly climbed on to the *kang*[2] and kneeled down to sweep it for me. Her

1 Hundred-Regiment Campaign — a famous counter-offensive against the Japanese troops simultaneously launched by the Communist Eighth Route Army in the five provinces of North China in the autumn of 1940.

2 *Kang* is the raised platform-like brick bed of North China villages. In winter, it can be heated from outside the house.

boy stood timidly at the door, looking in. Seeing a dark-red enamelled cup tied to my knapsack, he slipped into the room and looked at me. I smiled at the boy and this encouraged him and he began to play with the cup. Shuan-chu and I lit our pipes. Shuan-chu was the only person in the room who looked ill at ease. After a couple of puffs, he put out his pipe. He kept on taking the towel off his head to wipe away the sweat on his face, would suddenly address me only to lapse into silence.... I happened to turn my head and saw two women standing at the door.

The one standing outside the room was the young woman I had seen the previous day when I came to see the room. As she saw me looking at her, she lowered her head. Fingering the corner of her dress, she said in a low voice, "You've moved already?" The woman inside the room looked older. She smiled at me and continued stitching a cloth sole. I turned to look at Shuan-chu. He threw the towel on his shoulder and said, "I...I must be going now...."

"Did you come with him?" the young woman standing outside asked before I had a chance to say anything. She pushed the other woman forward and both were now in the room.

"I...I am going to the fair. As we were going the same way, I helped him bring his things here!" stammered Shuan-chu.

"You know each other?" I asked.

The two women smiled, but said nothing. Shuan-chu once again removed the towel to wipe away his sweat. At that moment, the boy turned round and, pointing at him, said,

"I know he's the director of the National Salvation Youth League in Lower Village. Isn't he, sister?"

"Yes, he is," the older woman replied casually.

The old woman, having swept clean the *kang*, got

down to the floor. Dusting off her dress, she exchanged a few words with me. And then she bombarded Shuan-chu with questions: "From Lower Village? Who is your family? Did you accompany this comrade here? ..."

"He's a high-ranking cadre in Lower Village—director of the National Salvation Youth League and captain of the Anti-Japanese Youth Pioneers," the younger woman at the door answered her mother for Shuan-chu. Then, lifting her face and looking out into the courtyard, she continued, "Mother, do you need anything from the fair?"

"Your father is already at the fair. He will buy everything we need."

"But he's going to the fair, too!"

"Yes, I...I must be going now...." mumbled Shuan-chu and turned abruptly to look at the young woman. As he approached the door, the girl dropped her head and blushed. I saw Shuan-chu looking back again from the courtyard and noticed that the girl was looking stealthily in his direction. The older woman saw this too and pushed her out of the room.

Left alone, I slowly untied my luggage and took out some stationery. There was not even a desk in the room. The boy brought me a low-legged table and put it on the *kang*. A moment later, the old woman came in with a handful of dried dates, offered them to me and began to chat.

I learned that there were five persons in the Chen family. The old man was fifty and his wife was three years older. Their boy was called Chin-so and the two women were their daughters, the younger named Chin-feng. The old woman had gray hair and was rather tall. Her sallowish face was quite round, and there was a rosy tinge on her cheeks. She struck me as a capable housewife—energetic if garrulous. The boy was

about eleven. He was curious about everything in my room—my stationery, my toilet articles, my coat....

That afternoon, I came back from a meeting and sat down on the threshold to read a newspaper. My room was in the eastern wing of the house. The two Chen sisters were sitting on the stone steps leading to the northern rooms, doing some needlework. Chin-feng looked, at most, twenty. She had a slender figure and an oval face. Her dark brown eyes sparkled. As the villagers were rather poor, they could not afford calico and floral prints for their dresses. Like other women in the village, Chin-feng wore a black cotton jacket and trousers, with the latter even patched in some places. But she looked neat and clean. She was mending a pair of her brother's trousers. Her sister looked about thirty. She had a healthy complexion, though there were many wrinkles on her forehead and around the corners of her eyes. Her cotton-padded trousers were tied closely at the ankles. She was still stitching the cloth sole. I was reading the newspaper, but several times I raised my eyes and looked at the women and I saw that Chin-feng was peeking at me. This embarrassed me and I went to my room.

After supper, I busied myself with making rounds of the living quarters assigned to my colleagues, and was issued with sundry articles. It was dark when I got back. I lit the lamp, intending to take a rest. We were then still using kerosene lamps in the villages. The light attracted the attention of the Chens. The old woman, holding Chin-so by the hand, came in. Her elder daughter remained standing at the door, busy with the cloth sole. Chin-feng brought a bowl with two millet cakes stuffed with dates. She put it on the *kang* and asked me to eat. At the same time, she peeped at what I had written. I was feeling rather uneasy when the old man came in, nodding and smiling. He pointed

with his pipe at the cakes and said, "Help yourself, comrade. That's the best we can offer you. This is the only village around here that produces dates, quite a rarity, eh?"

I thanked him and then asked, "Just back from the fair? What have you bought?"

"Yes, I've just returned. I've bought some millet and cloth."

"Yes," put in the old woman, "we haven't made ourselves any new clothes for nearly three years. Now with the cloth we've bought, we're going to make a quilt, some shoes and socks. We'll replace some of our worn clothes and patch others. We're still hard up."

The old man squatted on the edge of the *kang* and urged me to eat the cakes. Striking the flint to light his pipe, he picked up where his wife had stopped and said, "Things are not bad this year. We had a democratic movement last autumn. The old village head has been replaced with a good one, and now the Peasants' Association is working well. My rent has been reduced by twenty-five per cent, and the arrears have been cancelled. That's why I have been able to get more grain."

"You'll live better if you all work hard together," I said, eating a cake.

Chin-so asked his father for a pencil when Chin-feng took out a red-coloured one from her pocket, waved it and cried, "Chin-so, look!"

There was a scramble for the pencil. The old woman began to scold them. The elder sister leaning against the door shouted at them that they were disturbing me. The old man stood up and said,

"Chin-so, you've got one too, in mother's needle case. Stop scrambling!"

Chin-so ran away to get the pencil and the others followed him one after another. Chin-feng was the last

to leave. She took out a new writing-pad and asked me to write her name on it for her and whether I would teach her to read and write in my spare time. She stayed in my room for a while and then left. I walked to the door and saw that the Chens had all returned to their rooms. I was pleased at the thought that I was again fortunate to have good neighbours. To tell the truth, I had found it hard to part with my former host Shuan-chu!

Here, in Upper Village, my life differed little from my life in Lower Village. In the day, I was busy with my work, and no one came to disturb me. In the evening, Chin-feng and Chin-so often came to learn some Chinese characters from me or to write something. As I also lectured on politics at the village winter school, I gradually became acquainted with all the villagers. Sometimes, Chin-feng would bring other women along with her to learn Chinese characters from me. Once she said,

"Comrade Lao Kang, you should teach us patiently, as patiently as you did . . . as you did . . . when you were teaching Shuan-chu and his friends in Lower Village."

"How did you know that I had taught Shuan-chu and his friends in Lower Village?" I asked, surprised.

"Think I don't know?" she countered.

Two of the women began to whisper something to each other and then burst into laughter. Chin-feng jumped at them and playfully pummelled them. "Go to the devil!" she shouted laughingly, and they went out, jostling each other.

Shuan-chu turned up quite often. Once he came when the old man was away and the old woman and Chin-so had taken the donkey to turn the millstone. Shuan-chu came with the same belt around his waist and the same puttees around his legs. After exchang-

ing a few words with me and learning a few characters, he took out his diary and asked me to read it. It was a new writing-pad. It seemed to me that I had seen it somewhere. I made some corrections and explained them while reading it through. At the same time, I praised him for the progress he had made.

Just then, the two Chen sisters entered the room. Shuan-chu appeared uneasy, and it looked as if he were sitting on thorns.

The older sister, leaning against the red wardrobe, was sewing cloth socks. She was silent as usual and, her head down, was busy with her work. Chin-feng was stitching her father's cotton-padded shoes. She came smiling to the table on the *kang* and looked at Shuan-chu's diary, "Have you written all this, Shuan-chu?" she asked.

"Of course!"

"You've written so much already!"

Shuan-chu did not want to let Chin-feng read his diary and tried to cover it up with his hands, but could not stop me from showing it to Chin-feng. Rubbing his face in embarrassment, he walked away from the *kang*, and began pacing the room. I said to Chin-feng,

"Shuan-chu knows more than you!"

"He's a big cadre!" she retorted.

"No more of it, no more of it!" Shuan-chu snatched away his diary, and turned to Chin-feng, "How are you getting along with your studies? You should let me see your exercise book, too!"

"Don't worry about my studies. I'll catch up with you in no time, I learn three characters from Lao Kang every day."

"Shuan-chu, how do you know she also has an exercise book?"

My question made Shuan-chu blush. He tried to deviate from the topic. After talking aimlessly for a

while, he reminded me of his request—to buy him a dictionary. As he was walking out, Chin-feng ran after him, saying, "Shuan-chu, you may ask the National Salvation Women's League in the village what they think about it. . . ."

The rest of their conversation was inaudible. I heard them whispering for a long while in the courtyard. Chin-feng's sister looked at me and then into the courtyard, and, sighing, turned to leave the room.

"Say, why don't you learn to read?" I asked her. She sighed again,

"I've been very much upset all this time. I haven't got patience. . . . Besides, I'm getting old!"

She smiled and left. Why was this woman upset? Her smile was so melancholy. . . . Did she really feel old? Since my arrival at this house, I had on many an occasion found her quite jolly in the company of her sister and other women of the village. She looked, at most, about twenty-five! She looked like a married woman. Was she, though?

It was 1940. Democratic elections had been held in the Shansi-Chahar-Hopei Border Region. The Eighth Route Army had just launched the Hundred-Regiment Campaign against the enemy. On August 13, the Shansi-Chahar-Hopei Sub-bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China promulgated a twenty-article administrative programme for this border region. It was my job to explain the programme to the villagers and I began to do it during the political study hour at the winter school. The people of the border region were deeply interested in it. Although Chin-feng attended the explanations of the programme at the winter school, she would come to my room the following evening and would ask me to explain it again. Her father, mother and Chin-so would come together with her. Even her sister, who appeared indifferent

to studies, would occasionally drop in to listen. While I explained, they would raise a number of questions. They never seemed tired although they had to sit up late at night. Chin-so would sometimes doze off in his mother's arms. At other times, he would stand on the *kang*, throw his arms around my neck and bombard me with all sorts of questions: "What does a Communist look like? Have you ever seen a Communist? How is it that the Communist Party is so good? . . ." At such times, Chin-feng, who usually sat opposite me, would glower at her brother and would not look at me until her mother had led Chin-so away. Then her eyes would brighten up. After listening to me for some time, she would bend over the small table on the *kang* and jot down something in her notebook. . . .

The Chen family led a peaceful life. During the slack season in winter, the two sisters occupied themselves with needlework; the old man fed the pigs and raked manure; the boy went out with his father to cut firewood on the slope of the hill. The old woman's work consisted of cooking, watching the donkey turn the millstone and feeding the chickens. Life in the democratic region continued to improve. The land rent paid by the Chen family was further reduced. To tell the truth, they were pretty well off and could afford steamed bread several times a month.

But there was something wrong with the family. They were often quarrelling, although they did not raise much noise. They squabbled in their own rooms, so I was at a loss to figure out what was the matter. I asked every one of them about it, but no one would tell me anything, although Chin-so once remarked as if casually,

"It's all about my elder sister!"

"What about her?" I demanded.

"I don't know!"

Once, after a long squabble, the old man ran out into the courtyard, mad like a bull. Rushing out, I saw him facing the rooms where the Chens lived, stamping his feet and sputtering away,

"I . . . I'll have nothing to do with that! You . . . you decide it yourselves, I refuse to bother about it!"

Then he walked out, fuming. I asked him what it was all about, but he would not answer me. What had happened in the northern rooms? Who was it weeping convulsively there? I asked Chin-so, and he told me it was his elder sister. I decided it would be unfit to ask any more questions and retired to my own room, still wondering.

After a while, however, calm reigned again; life became normal. And I stopped worrying about it.

One day at noon, I went to the winter school to lecture on the administrative programme to women. In the evening, the Chens came to my room rather early. I was occupied with some work, so I suggested I would do the explaining the next day. Chin-feng's sister, unlike her usual self, smiled and insisted,

"Better today. After you've finished. We'll. . . ."

"Please, Lao Kang!" urged Chin-feng. I was forced to give in. I saw the old man was not there and asked whether we should wait for him. They said, "Let's go ahead without him!" So I started.

That day I spoke about the fourteenth article of the programme. I explained one article every three or five days and thus many days had already passed since I began the explanations. It was early January, and the small village was hit by an extremely cold spell. It had snowed in the morning and the sky had been overcast the whole day. I shivered with cold. I removed the small table and told them to sit on the *kang* around a charcoal brazier. Chin-feng's sister put away her

needlework on top of the red wardrobe, but would not sit on the *kang*. She stood by, listening silently with her head down. The old woman kept looking at me and saying "yes, yes" every time I had uttered a couple of words. Chin-feng was very inquisitive. The article I explained that day was about women's problems—about women's social status, marriage, child marriage, divorce. . . . Chin-feng asked me a string of questions: "What is a child bride?" "Why must a man be twenty and a woman eighteen before they can get married?" and so on. Her sister would lift her head every now and then to look at me.

A gust of wind was rising outside, whistling. The door of my room had not been tightly closed, and was suddenly thrown open. The flame of my lamp flickered in the wind. Chin-so, who had fallen asleep on my overcoat, nestled closer to me, mumbling, "Mummy, mummy. . . ." I heard someone cough outside my window; it seemed as if an old man was trying to suppress a coughing fit caused by the wind. I immediately called out, "Who is it?" Chin-feng shouted, "Father!" But there was no response. Her sister closed the door, and I resumed my talk.

I spent more time than usual to explain the article, and Chin-feng asked more questions than ever before. I was dead tired when they left. Nevertheless, I continued to work late into the night to finish my job.

I got up very late the next day. I hastily took a snack and then went to a meeting. On my return, the Chens were preparing lunch. Chin-feng's sister was working the bellows on the kitchen stove outside the northern rooms while, inside, the old woman was grumbling at somebody. Chin-feng's sister suddenly let go the bellows and shouted,

"Mother, you shouldn't be so stubborn! You've already made me miserable and you want to do the same

thing to Chin-feng. . . . Can't you see how much the world has changed?"

I didn't know what had happened in the family. I had been too busy with my work those few days to occupy myself with their business. For three whole days there had been meeting of the cadres of my organization and I felt relieved when the meeting was over.

The weather was fine, and after breakfast I went to the playground in the southern part of the village to play basketball with some comrades. On my way, I saw Chen Yun-nien riding his donkey in a southerly direction. I remembered that recently he had appeared downcast and that for several days I had not talked with him. So I went up to him and asked,

"Where are you going?"

"Eh? I'm going to look up a relative."

He still looked a bit depressed. What on earth was happening? I played basketball for a while and then returned home. When Chin-feng's sister saw me enter the courtyard, she smiled at me in greeting. Chin-feng hastened to tug at her sister's sleeve and struck her playfully.

The sister continued to smile at me and I smiled back. I asked them what it was all about. Chin-feng, her head hanging down, ran inside. Chin-so asked me, "What do you eat these few days?" His eldest sister said, "Aren't you going to eat something better tomorrow?" I told them, "I've been eating millet all these days!" What did they mean, I wondered. Why were they asking me all these questions? Chin-feng's sister appeared changed, smiling at me slyly all the time. And Chin-feng would just scamper away without uttering a word every time she saw me. She even stopped learning Chinese characters from me. At the winter

school, whenever I happened to look at her, she would blush. I was very much perplexed.

The next day, I saw Chin-feng killing a hen and saw the Chens preparing steamed bread. Chin-feng blushed and slipped away every time she saw me, while her sister kept smiling at me. I was seized with curiosity. Then the old woman unexpectedly invited me to dinner in the afternoon. I did my best to decline the invitation, but she pulled me by the hand and Chin-so did the same. I said, "I'll be criticized if I accept your invitation."

"Criticized? You've got to come even if you get beaten up later. The dinner is prepared especially for you. We've some serious business to discuss with you."

I stepped into the northern room, red in the face and greatly puzzled. The small table on the *kang* had been washed very clean and there were chopsticks and wine cups on it. Chin-so brought in a jug of hot wine and the old woman filled my cup to the brim. I was so nervous I could hardly speak. Suddenly I heard the two sisters arguing in whispers outside the window near the stove. "You serve it!"

"No, I won't!"

"All right, then. It's not for me, anyway!" This was followed by a suppressed laugh. It sounded like the elder sister. Then I heard Chin-feng's voice again, "Please!"

"Don't beg me! Better beg him!" And the elder sister giggled again.

"Oh, go to the devil!" Then Chin-feng came in bringing a sumptuous dish and steamed bread, and, with her head lowered, she tried hard not to look at me. Having placed the dish and steamed bread on the table, she rushed out, glowing in the face. Immediately, the two sisters began to whisper and argue anew.

Having forced me to finish a cup of wine and a leg

of the chicken, the old woman sent Chin-so away and turned to me,

"Didn't you say that evening, Lao Kang, that women are now allowed to choose their own husbands? That when a couple don't get along well, they are allowed to break up, to. . . . Eh, how do you say it? You see, I've forgotten it again, oh, yes, to divorce each other? I've invited you over exactly for this. You . . . Lao Kang, you don't know how unhappy I have been!"

The old woman sat opposite me across the small table on the *kang*. She kept wiping away her tears with the corner of her dress after every two or three sentences, but the tears continued gushing out. She blinked and bent forward closer to me, "It is now eight years since my elder daughter was married at sixteen. Her husband is ten years her senior. In her husband's home, she had been ill-treated by her in-laws. Then the war broke out. Life became harder and they even began to beat her and refuse to give her food. She has been unhappy all these years and it makes my heart ache to mention it. She is my flesh and blood, after all!"

The old woman was weeping so bitterly she could not go on with her story.

"When did she come back?" I asked.

"She came here last autumn and has refused to return to her husband. He sent for her once. Since then we have not heard from him. I was told that . . . that . . . he was going around with a bad woman! How could he have time to think of his wife? Besides, his home is in the enemy-occupied area!"

"Why not divorce him? She has good reasons to do so!" I said.

I was confounded by the old woman's tears and the story of her elder daughter's unhappy marriage.

She continued, "Lao Kang, I want to speak now of my second daughter, Chin-feng. She has almost

met with the same ill fate as her sister. Chin-feng is now nineteen and at fourteen she was engaged to a boy seven years older. They say that he has made no progress and his proposed candidacy was even opposed in the election last autumn. I've seen that fellow. . . . Please help yourself, Lao Kang!"

She replenished my cup and passed me some chicken.

"He's as ugly as he is good-for-nothing. All he does is talk, eat and drink. They say he is also keeping a bad woman! Last September, God knows where, he saw my daughter, and since then he has been pressing us with the wedding. He said then she must be sent over this winter. Chin-feng refused to go and her sister backed her. So have I put off the matter for as long as possible. Now the fellow's family say that they will definitely take her away next spring. Lao Kang, what do you say to this? Oh, my fate is. . . ."

"You may cancel the engagement!" I said.

"I beg your pardon?" The old woman, it seemed, had not understood me.

"Didn't you say that they were only engaged? Now Chin-feng does not like the fellow. If he is really backward, it is perfectly all right to break off the engagement!"

"Is it all right?" she appeared incredulous.

"Of course!"

The old woman opened wide her eyes and sighed as though she had been relieved of a heavy load. She hastened to offer me another drink. I took a sip and relaxed. Glancing at the door, I saw somebody sitting on the threshold. It seemed to be the old woman's elder daughter, but as she was partly hidden by the door, I could not say so for sure. Then, in the paper window, I saw the shadow of a woman eavesdropping; but as soon as I looked, the shadow disappeared. I turned to

the old woman again, and the shadow reappeared in the window. Then I remembered how Chin-feng's sister had stared at me when I was explaining to them that windy night the meaning of divorce. No clause regarding the cancellation of an engagement had been included in the administrative programme and I had also forgotten to speak about it. That night, as I recalled now, Chin-feng appeared to have some questions she wanted to ask me, but had left without doing so.

"Lao Kang, we've agreed among ourselves that we should, first of all, solve Chin-feng's problem and then her sister's. Didn't you say that a divorce was allowed by the programme? Since that night, my elder daughter has been very happy. So she can afford to wait a bit. That night you didn't say that Chin-feng's matter could be settled too. That's why later we quarrelled over it!"

The old woman shut her mouth and looked as if she was displeased with me, then she smiled.

"Look here! If a married couple are allowed to get divorced, why can't an unmarried couple break off their engagement?" I asked.

"How stubborn we have been! But my husband is even worse. You know, he has gone to see what has become of Chin-feng's fiancé. We'll wait until he comes back!"

"Well, there won't be any more trouble. If you have well-founded reasons, you may go to the village or district government and have the thing straightened out immediately!"

In the courtyard, the two Chen sisters were again making fun of each other. Chin-so came in and his mother gave him dinner. I left. When I got into the courtyard, the elder sister was laughing and clapping her hands. I told them it was time for them to take their meal. Chin-feng, her face red, rushed into the

northern room. Her sister smiled at me and then ran after Chin-feng, shouting happily, "Everything is all right now!"

After this, the whole family appeared happier with the exception of Chen Yun-nien who remained silent after his return, and for several days did not speak to me. Every day, I saw him talking to village elders or standing at street corners chatting with village cadres. Some time later, these village cadres talked to me about Chin-feng's case and told me that her fiancé was really backward and was considered a problem. Soon afterwards, I learned from the village cadres that the district government had annulled their engagement. When I came home, I asked Chin-feng's sister and she told me all about it. She added that she herself would divorce her husband next spring.

Trivial as it might seem, the whole thing filled me with joy. Disregarding Chin-feng's bashfulness, I started joking with her, and she became less shy with me. She went on learning Chinese characters and pursued political studies with greater enthusiasm. She now often came to my room in the day-time: sometimes to study, sometimes just to talk for a while. Her visits were so frequent I felt uncomfortable, but found it hard to say anything against them. So I dropped some hints. Chin-feng's sister joked,

"Comrade Lao Kang, you're bashful too!... You've come to educate people, but how come you've got feudal ideas?"

These words made me colour up. After that, however, Chin-feng came no more in the day-time. When she came in the evening, she was invariably accompanied either by her mother, her brother, her sister or some other women. That was better.

Time passed quickly. It snowed twice, and we had two windstorms. Then came the Lunar New Year. One

morning, I was buried in work when Shuan-chu suddenly turned up. He had not been around for about twenty days. He still wore the same belt around the waist and the same puttees around the legs; on his head was a black, cotton-padded cap he had made himself and in his hands a parcel.

"Haven't got anything really good, Lao Kang. These twenty eggs are my New Year gift to you."

I wanted to curse him for giving me a gift! He let me read his diary. Seeing the newly-published book *Yangko Opera* on my desk, he took it away.

"Ha, I've been looking for some plays for our village troupe. This is just the right sort of book for us!"

I was then very busy, so I told him that I had no time to read his diary right away. He said there was no hurry about it and added that he would come back for it in a few days. Soon he began to talk with someone outside. It turned out to be Chin-feng to whom he was whispering. Later they entered my room and, leaning themselves against the big red wardrobe, continued to talk. I was so engrossed in my own writing that I did not pay the least attention to their conversation.

After the New Year holidays, Shuan-chu came even more frequently. He would come once every five or six days, always at noon, when I was taking a rest. He would call me as soon as he entered the courtyard. I would walk out and tell him to come in, but he would never do so. There in the courtyard he would give me his diary or have a brief talk with me and then leave hurriedly. It was a custom with the Chen sisters to sit on the doorsteps in front of the northern room doing needlework in the day-time, but later I learned that Chin-feng would go inside the northern room every time Shuan-chu came. Since some time it appeared as if they had quarrelled. I was greatly puzzled. Yet, this was contradicted by the rumours in the village, "Chin-

feng and Shuan-chu are seeking freedom, they are in love. . . ." I asked Chin-feng's sister about it, and she said,

"They've been on good terms for quite a long time. These last few days there seems to be something wrong with them. I asked Chin-feng about it, but she won't say anything. You'd better ask Shuan-chu about it!"

Shuan-chu would not tell me anything either. When I asked him, he just smiled and blushed, and then told me to "wait and see."

The rumours continued to circulate. The village cadres and my colleagues even began to question me about it. What did I know? All I knew was that Shuan-chu continued to come to see me, to ask me a question or two, that he did not enter my room, and that he did not talk with Chin-feng. The moment he came, Chin-feng would disappear into the northern room. I further learned that Chin-feng often went out. One day, Chin-so rushed in, wheezing out,

"Oh, oh...Sister Chin-feng's gone to the date grove with Shuan-chu...."

"Why make such a fuss about it?" the old man glared at the boy.

"I saw it myself!" Chin-so said.

"You saw, you saw . . . you silly fool!"

The old man stamped his feet and ran into the northern room, cursing. I pulled Chin-so aside and questioned him, but he told me nothing definite. The rumours were still in the air. The old man seemed to be in a frightfully nasty temper; he had not spoken to me for many days and constantly upbraided his wife or elder daughter, often without reason. Yet every time he saw Chin-feng return, he would walk off angrily, but without a harsh word.

The days were getting warmer; it was spring again. Willow catkins were floating about, tender green leaves

on the date trees were sprouting and little greenish flowers were appearing on their twigs. The villagers began to fertilize the fields and to prepare for sowing. One evening, after supper, I took a spade and went to a field in the western part of the village to work the vegetable plot my organization had rented. Returning home, I met a comrade who wanted to have a talk with me. We sat down under a locust tree near the field. The rays of the setting sun were bathing the gate of the house where I lived. I saw a large group of women sitting outside the gate, busy making shoes for the army. There was a lot of noise over there. Suddenly I saw Shuan-chu approaching from the northern end of the road with a spade on his shoulder. I remembered that he had a potato field of one *mou* in the northern part of Upper Village. The women must have spotted Shuan-chu too, for they tugged and jostled one another although none of them said anything. Slowly, one after another, they slipped inside the gate, carrying their benches with them. Shuan-chu appeared to be greatly embarrassed and was walking ungainly. Chin-feng was the only woman to have remained outside the gate. She looked as though she did not know what had happened around her. She turned her head to look back and then immediately resumed her work, her head down and her lips tightly set. I looked ahead, completely neglecting the comrade who was talking with me. Shuan-chu did not see me; he was walking with a heavy step. He did not look back until he had left the gate far behind him and was about to turn. Then he paused every few steps to look back. And I clearly saw that Chin-feng, bending her head over her work, was following him with her eyes.

I did not sleep well that night. Early the next morning, I went to Lower Village to see Shuan-chu. He had not got up yet. His mother, elder brother and

sister-in-law greeted me. While preparing breakfast for me, his mother said,

"Something queer has happened to him these last few days. He keeps quiet all day long and is listless. When we ask him if he is ill, he says no. He works silently in the field after each meal."

"Don't worry, I'll help him out of it," I comforted her.

I pulled Shuan-chu out of bed and after breakfast we went to the field together. We sat on an elevated path in the field, and I asked him,

"What's the matter? Now let's be frank and tell me all about it!"

He refused to say anything. I spent a long time persuading him, but he remained silent. I lost patience and rising to my feet, shouted at him,

"Why are you so backward? And you an important cadre!"

He smiled at me, nudging me to sit down again, and said,

"To tell you the truth, I've been thinking about asking your advice!"

"I'm at your service. Out with it!"

"I've been in love with Chin-feng for a long time. We promised each other long ago that we'd marry!"

"Then why keep it a secret?"

"Oh, we're real gawks! We're so bashful we don't know how to go about it and whom to consult."

"Why have you stopped speaking with each other?"

"Ha . . . we've spoken quite a lot!"

Shuan-chu hugged me and laughed. He said he had been calling on me for the sole purpose of meeting Chin-feng. Their rendezvous was a secluded corner in the date grove. Every time he reached the courtyard, Chin-feng would go into the northern room where she signalled to him by making holes with a needle in the

window paper. Three holes in the fifth square meant an appointment in three days; four holes in the same square meant an appointment in four days. Three holes in the seventh square meant an appointment in the morning; five holes in the same square meant an appointment in the afternoon. When I heard this, I gave him a poke and burst into laughter. He blushed, buried his face in his hands, and chuckled. I decided to make fun of him a little.

"And what did you do with her?"

"Nothing! I didn't dare! I only shook hands with her just as you do when you meet women."

I nudged him again. He felt embarrassed and went to work in the field. I told him I was sure his courtship would be successful. Then I returned to his home. When I told the story to his mother and elder brother, they said they had no objection to his marrying Chin-feng. I returned to Upper Village and spoke about it to the old woman and Chin-feng's sister. They said that they also agreed to her marriage and that the only objections came from the obstinate old man. That evening, I invited him over and talked with him patiently. After I had finished, he said,

"I don't object to this marriage, either. Frankly, Lao Kang, these old bones of mine are useless, yet I've got a stubborn mind, too conservative to receive new ideas. Ha, ha...." He chuckled and puffed at his pipe. "My way of thinking lags far behind that of the young people. Let me first talk it over with my friends. Agreed?"

The question remained to be settled when I set out for the countryside. I left the matter with the village cadres, and wrote letters to the National Salvation Women's League and the National Salvation Youth League before I went to work to Yihsien County.

I could not help thinking about the matter. After

twenty days, I hurried back to Upper Village. On my way, I saw a *Pocket Dictionary for Students* at the fair in Shanpei Village. I bought it at once. I was sorry there was only one copy of it.

Chin-feng snatched the dictionary as soon as she saw it. I was very much annoyed, and told her that Shuan-chu had asked me to buy him this dictionary more than a year before that. But she refused to give it back and asked me how much it cost. I was vexed, and would not tell her.

Two days later, after I had reported to my superiors, the village cadres told me that Shuan-chu and Chin-feng's problem had been satisfactorily settled and that, with the approval of both families, they had become engaged. I was delighted and rushed home to congratulate Chin-feng, but she was out turning the millstone with her mother. When her sister came out, I asked her,

"Chin-feng has become engaged to Shuan-chu?"

"Yes. I've been divorced too!" she announced.

"They exchanged gifts the other day," she went on. "Shuan-chu gave her two towels, two pairs of stockings, some books and pencils. She gave him that dictionary she had snatched from you, a pair of shoes, a pair of socks, some exercise books and pencils."

"What are you babbling about?" Chin-feng asked, coming in. When I laughed loudly and bowed to congratulate her, she blushed. Chin-feng's sister took out a new towel from her pocket, waved it before my eyes and handed it to me, saying to Chin-feng, "There must be a towel for Lao Kang, I guess. When I learned that Lao Kang had returned, I took for him one of the towels which Shuan-chu had given you. What do you say? All right?"

"That's a good idea!" her mother interposed, stepping in. Chin-feng snatched away the towel from her

sister, and, looking at me from the corner of her eyes, she said, "He is going to have one anyway! This afternoon Shuan-chu will bring him a towel and a pair of socks which I have made myself. That towel is even better than this!"

Chin-so came home at this moment. Everybody was laughing. He jumped, craned his neck and shouted, "Hurray!" Then the old man entered the courtyard and, smiling and stamping his feet, he murmured, "Good, good...." He looked at us and then disappeared into the northern room.

May 23, 1946

Blast Furnace

by Lu Chi

Lu Chi, born in 1924, was thrown into gaol in May 1944 by the Japanese invaders then occupying Northeast China because of his writings against them. He was released when Northeast China was liberated in 1945. Since then he has served as editor of several literary magazines and dailies. He also worked in the Hsinhua News Agency and the Hsinhua Broadcasting Station.

Among his works are the short stories, "The Blast Furnace" and "The Story of Little Lan"; and a collection of poems, "A Little Korean Girl."

It was Tsao's first day on the job at the iron smelting works, in July 1948, in the Northeast.

"Where are you from?" Yu, the foreman, asked him.

"I just got away from Changchun,"[1] said Tsao.

"What made you come here?"

"I heard that workers were well off in the liberated areas." Tsao was a little annoyed at all these questions. A man did his job and drew his pay and that should be the end of it.

But the sixty-year-old foreman wasn't through yet. Looking the newcomer over, he demanded, "Do you know anything about this kind of work?"

He doesn't think much of me, mused Tsao. The hell with him. Aloud, he said briefly, "A little. I've played around at it a couple of days."

The old man pushed the bifocals up on his nose and blinked a couple of times. "All right," he said care-

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[1] Then occupied by the Kuomintang reactionaries.

lessly. "You can help Wang over there carry firebricks."

So that's all I'm good for! Tsao fumed inwardly. Fine! I'll be watching to see what's so wonderful about the way this plant is run!...He glanced at the blast furnace, snorted, and went off with Wang.

From the whining blower a steady stream of hot air hissed through the main into the bustle pipe and then through four branch pipes called "tuyères" into the furnace. Two men stood on a top platform, feeding the open maw of the furnace with coke and iron ore. At the base, Sun, another workman, from time to time opened a small door where a tuyère entered the furnace, and with a crowbar poked at the slag solidifying at the opening. When the slag proved to be massed too hard for his efforts, he would call young Li who would pound the end of the crowbar with a sledge hammer until the obstruction was broken up. Then, with long pincers, Li would remove the coke blackened by the air-blast, piece by piece. Sun was responsible for all four tuyère openings and was forced to keep circling the furnace continuously. Floating on the surface of the liquid iron gathering in the base of the furnace was slag which, theoretically, should have flown out when tapped through an opening provided for that purpose. However, this seldom happened, and young Li would have to reach into the fiery tap hole with a long metal instrument to skim the slag out slowly and laboriously, while he roasted in perspiration.

Each time he returned with a load of firebricks, Tsao watched these proceedings in wonder. Finally he turned to Wang and asked, "Have you always worked the furnace this way?"

"What's wrong with this way!"

"Why do you use pincers to take coke from the tuyère openings?"

"That's the way we've done it in the three years I've been here; Foreman Yu says that's how the Japs used to do it. The coke is no good. The fire isn't hot enough to stop slag from hardening at the tuyère openings."

Tsao thought a moment. "How much iron do you get per kilo of coke?" he asked.

"About four kilos," said Wang.

"How come so little?"

"That's all we've ever gotten."

As they talked, the two walked towards the coke heap. Tsao picked up a piece and examined it.

"Is this what you're using?"

Wang nodded. Tsao tossed the coke back on the heap. "With this coke you ought to smelt more than four kilos of iron," he said. "There must be something wrong with the furnace."

"Do you understand this business?" asked Wang, surprised.

Tsao laughed. "I've spent a couple of days at it."

"Yu has run this furnace for over twenty years. What could you learn in a couple of days! Don't kid me!" Wang took it for granted that Tsao was joking and the latter said nothing further.

But a few minutes later, when the liquid iron was tapped, Tsao couldn't resist standing by and watching. The molten metal flowed out of the furnace into ladles. Workmen carried these ladles to the foundry-room where the fiery contents were spilled into sand moulds. Chang, an old-timer, stood grinning with a dab of clay on a long pole, ready to seal the tap hole again when the iron stopped flowing. The flow was very slow, and the workmen who carried the ladles had to wait a long time until their receptacles were filled.

Tsao was sure now that the furnace wasn't right.

He stepped forward and opened a tuyère cover. As he peered inside, Foreman Yu came up to him.

"What are you doing?" snapped the old man.

"Looking."

"Nobody told you to look. Get back to your firebricks."

Tsao slammed the cover with a clang and strode angrily away.

Glaring after his back, the foreman growled to Sun, "What a fresh kid! Is he trying to get tough with me? I've got a son older than him!"

One day something wrong happened to the "Old Sow" as the workers called the furnace. It didn't smelt well. They added coke, stepped up the blowing engine, but to no avail. The plant manager came down several times, the union leader kept worriedly circling the blast furnace, beads of perspiration stood out on Yu's forehead.... And why shouldn't they be upset? Every plant and workshop in the liberated areas had production schedules to meet. If they couldn't smelt iron, they'd be complete failures.

In the course of a frantically busy morning, the best they could coax from the "Old Sow" was only six "pigs" (two hundred kilos each). The strain seemed to make the astigmatic eyes of Yu more blurred than ever. As he polished the lenses of his bifocals for the hundredth time, he shook his head discouragedly.

"It's no use," he said to the plant manager. "We started on the new load of coke this morning and it's too sticky. It won't make iron."

That was serious. There was no time to order other coke, for the earliest possible delivery they could hope for would be ten days to half a month. Such a lengthy stoppage of production would result in a considerable loss. Frowning, the plant manager departed with the union leader.

Chang threw aside his clay dabbing pole and sat down hopelessly beside young Li. "You're always swearing at the 'Old Sow,' because she often shits," he said mournfully. "Now she won't even eat."

"This is no time to be funny," said Li. "What are we going to do if the furnace breaks down?"

A pall of gloom settled on everyone as the blower was being slowed down. Red molten metal no longer danced and bubbled in the furnace.... Tsao picked up a piece of the new coke and scrutinized it carefully from every angle for a long time. Finally, he could contain himself no longer.

"Who says you can't make iron with this coke?" he asked half aloud.

The old foreman overheard Tsao, and thought the younger man was ridiculing him. He became very angry. Jumping to his feet, he shouted, "If you can make iron with it, I'll turn my foreman's job over to you!"

The outburst took Tsao completely by surprise. He hadn't liked Yu from the beginning and now the man was attacking him. He flung the piece of coke to the ground. "What do I want your foreman's job for?" he retorted. "I'm not competing with you. We're not smelting any iron and I only wanted to help. If you don't believe me, forget it!" Tsao angrily walked away.

"Never mind the boasting," the old man yelled after him. "The stage is yours if you want to sing!"

Tsao made no reply, but stalked off into the foundry-room. When he was out of earshot, Sun criticized the foreman sharply.

"What's the idea of blowing up?" Sun demanded.

"Maybe he knows something. The way things are, anybody who has an idea ought to be allowed to try it."

Yu's full moustache bristled indignantly. "That kid's still wet behind the ears! I just don't think much of him!"

There was no talking to the old man when he got into one of his stubborn moods, and Sun didn't try. But he had been impressed with Tsao's manner. The man had seemed to know what he was talking about. So he went to look for Tsao. When he reached the entrance of the foundry-room, he ran into Wang, who had been Tsao's partner in carrying firebricks. Wang told him of the remarks Tsao had made the previous day about their smelting process. The two conferred for a few minutes, then entered the foundry-room together.

They found Tsao seated at the base of a machine. Deep in thought, he was staring absently at the black sand in the moulding boxes. Sun approached him.

"Tsao, old fellow. . . ."

The young man raised his head and gazed at them silently. Wang and Sun sat themselves down beside him.

"You think there's something wrong with our blast furnace, don't you?" Sun began.

Tsao had the same kind of hard pig-headedness as the foreman, and moreover he was still angry. His answer was surly. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Then why doesn't it make iron?"

Tsao laughed coldly. "The coke's no good," he replied sarcastically. "Didn't the foreman just say so?"

"Ah, come on, Tsao, don't sulk. The plant belongs to us. Can you stand by and see the furnace stop?"

"I don't know what you mean—'The plant belongs to us'...!" replied Tsao impatiently. "Don't tell me that story!"

"But Tsao, I'm sure you're a good mechanic and understand. . . ." Wang anxiously interposed, but before he could finish what he wanted to say, Tsao stood up and cut him short.

"I don't understand anything," he said flatly, and left them.

Tsao was seated disconsolately in his room when the plant manager and union leader entered.

The plant manager gave him a warm smile. "What do you think of our plant, Tsao?"

"Not bad," said Tsao briefly.

"Are you satisfied with your work?" asked the union leader. "I hear you had an argument with old man Yu."

What are they up to? thought Tsao, a little frightened. Do they want to punish me? Or maybe have me up for public criticism. They say they do that around here at the drop of a hat. "I didn't argue with him," he denied hastily.

The union leader laughed. "Yu is a stubborn old cuss. He's hard to convince, but if you can prove to him that he's wrong he behaves like a lamb."

Why were these men being so nice and friendly? Tsao thought of the officials in Kuomintang factories—vicious, nasty, always scowling. But these fellows . . . Tsao couldn't figure it out.

"Tsao," said the plant manager, "I understand you've had some experience with blast furnaces. What are you waiting for? We need help right now."

"I don't know much," said Tsao evasively.

The union leader came directly to the point. "Our furnace has stopped. If you've got a way to fix it, let's give it a try. The plant belongs to all of us."

The sincerity and intimacy with which these men treated him made Tsao too embarrassed to continue his pose of ignorance. "I have worked with blast fur-

naces," he admitted, "but I'm afraid. . . ." He paused uncertainly.

"What are you afraid of?" demanded the union leader. "What's on your mind?"

"I can't fix the furnace alone, I need men to help me," said Tsao. "If any of them were against me—if they didn't spread the ore or coke on evenly, or mixed in something that didn't belong—they could make me fail. . . ."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," laughed the plant manager. "There's nobody like that around here. Everyone will help you."

"We're with you," said the union leader, clapping him on the back. "Go ahead and fix it!"

His head propped by his hands, Yu, the old foreman, gloomily sat on a pile of firebricks. From the foundry-room, he could hear the endless rumbling of the crane, but here, beside the blast furnace, all was silent. Sick at heart, he raised his head and stared at the cold hulk. Could anything be done? Probably not. According to his own experience, when the coke was no good, neither god nor demon could get iron out of the furnace. He'd just have to wait for the decision of the plant manager.

Just then, the manager appeared. With him were Tsao and the union leader. Yu jumped to his feet.

"What are we going to do?" he anxiously inquired.

"We've been trying to get you new coke, but we still can't get delivery before two weeks," said the plant manager. "Maybe there's something wrong with the furnace. Let Tsao take a look."

Yu was thunderstruck. "Who says it's the fault of the furnace?" he demanded angrily. "It's the coke that's no good. I've run this furnace for twenty years. Do you mean to say I don't understand a thing like this!"

"We can't always rely on old methods," replied the plant manager. "If they don't work, we all have to try to think of a new way to get iron out of this furnace again as quickly as possible. It would be much better if you set your mind to the problem instead of losing your temper so often."

The workers laughed and the union leader said, "Go ahead, Tsao."

Although irritated by Yu's words, Tsao said nothing. Instead he uncovered one of the tuyère openings and looked closely. It was here he suspected that the fault lay. He recalled how Sun was kept busy clearing the slag from these openings with a crowbar. Then, when he examined the place where the molten iron was tapped, he began to get the picture. He pondered for a few minutes, then addressed the union leader.

"The main trouble is with the tuyère openings," he said definitely.

"How do you know?"

"The openings are too big, and they're straight. Because the air doesn't blow down to the bed of the embers, the fire below isn't hot. That makes the iron smelt slowly and the slag become hard. The bigness of openings lets air blow on the nearby slag and coke and turn them black. Coming in straight and flat, the air makes the embers in the middle burn hotter, but most of it just blows against the opposite wall of the furnace and makes holes in it. That's why there's a leakage of iron."

This was the first time in his twenty years' experience that Yu had ever heard this idea. Leakage of iron had always been the case. What could this infant do to change it? It had been the same way when the Japs were here. The more he thought, the surer he was that Tsao was talking nonsense. Yu couldn't suppress a snort.

But to the plant manager the theory sounded rea-

sonable. Though he himself didn't know much about technique, Tsao seemed to him to know his business. He nodded and asked, "How can you correct it?"

"If I change the tuyère openings, it should be all right."

"Good! When can you start?"

"Right now."

The union leader looked at his watch. "Isn't it too late today?" he asked Tsao. "It's near quitting time."

"That doesn't matter. We'll fix it tonight, then tomorrow we can fire up and try it out."

"Tsao, you're really all right!" approved the union leader happily. "What kind of material will you need?"

Looking at the group surrounding him, Tsao said slowly, "I don't need any special material but I'd like to have two men to help me."

"Who can help Tsao repair the furnace tonight?" the union leader asked the workers.

Sun promptly stepped forward and spoke to Tsao, "Will I do?"

Young Wang was right behind him. "Count me in."

"That's fine," said Tsao, very pleased. "The three of us can do it."

Li, the young pincers man, strode over from the side lines. "Tsao," he pleaded, "can't you take one more?"

"Of course," laughed Tsao. "There's always room for one more on a hard job."

Yu and Chang, the tap hole caulker, stood by without uttering a sound, but the old foreman's thick moustache bristled like an angry pouter pigeon.

Tsao and his three helpers began to work after dinner. It was past midnight by the time they had remade the tuyère openings.

"Now they're smaller, and angled down," said Tsao.

"The air-blast will hit the embers on the bottom, then reflect up again. That will give us a hot fire and smelt the iron quickly. Because the openings are smaller, the air won't blacken the outside of the coke. . . ."

While this sounded reasonable, the men still were non-committal. As he washed his hands, Sun said, "We'll see tomorrow."

Tsao stretched his back and confided, "To tell you the truth, I've been working with furnaces since I was sixteen. That's more than ten years and I've stumbled on a lot of tricks. This coke will burn fine, now that we've changed the openings."

After they finished washing up, Tsao gave the repairs a final check. "They'll do," he announced. "Now let's get some sleep."

"Tomorrow we don't want any more nonsense out of you," said young Li, shaking his finger at the furnace, "you Old Sow!"

The next day, the plant manager, the union leader and several section chiefs all gathered around the furnace for the testing. Everyone was under a strain as they examined and questioned. Old man Yu said nothing, but he had a sceptical air of "Show me!"

"How much iron will you try to smelt per kilo of coke?" Sun asked Tsao.

"We'll try for eight kilos, first," replied Tsao, after a brief deliberation.

Sun was startled. "Eight kilos!" he demanded incredulously. "It can't be done. Even when we had good coke, we could only smelt five, at best. I think you shouldn't aim so high on the first test."

"Let's try it," said Tsao confidently.

Who does he think he's kidding? old Yu angrily said to himself. This is going to be some show!

A few of the men thought it was possible; most of

them were not so sure. "Can you do it?" asked the plant manager rather anxiously.

"We'll do it," replied Tsao firmly.

"Come on then," said the union leader cheerfully, infected by his confidence. "I'll measure the ore."

The furnace was loaded, the fire was lit, and before long the blower was turned on. Its whining vibrations seemed to rack the heart of every tensely watching man. Sun was especially nervous. If they failed today, they'd really be in a fix!

High on the loading platform, the men began dumping coke and ore into the blackened mouth of the top of the furnace. Old Chang thrust his pole into the tap hole from which the liquid iron would flow and was answered by wicked tongues of roaring flame.

Tsao watched the tuyère openings. After poking once or twice with a crowbar at the coke near their openings, he closed the inspection ports and stood by, silent. In spite of his faith in his method, he couldn't help feeling a little tension.

He made no move for so long that Sun became upset. "Don't you want to check the air openings again?" hinted the older man.

"Not yet," said Tsao.

Sun was really afraid of this procedure. In the past if you hadn't cleared the tuyère openings by now, they'd be clogged solid with slag.

Several minutes later, Tsao at last uncovered a tuyère opening, prodded a few times with his crowbar, then closed the little door.

"Shall we take the blackened coke out with pincers?" asked Sun.

"No, that's not necessary. I just stirred them a bit so that they'll sink down and burn."

Yu, the old foreman, couldn't understand these goings-on. If you don't keep clearing the air openings

and you don't remove the unburned coke, how are you going to prevent it from blocking the air pipes?

"She's spilling iron!" yelled young Li. He was the first to notice the molten metal beginning to pour from the tap hole.

Chang sealed it with a dab of clay. That's strange, he thought. She sure smelts fast today.

Then from the loading platform came the announcement: "She's smelted five 'pigs'!"

In all the years of Yu's experience, the furnace had never produced iron so quickly. The grinning men burst into cheers. Young Wang rushed into the foundry-room, yelling for them to carry the ladles. Li capered and patted the sides of blast furnace, "This time you're all right!" he commended affectionately.

Fixing his bifocals firmly on his nose, the old foreman uncovered a tuyère opening and peered into the furnace. There was no blocking slag; only around the very edges of the glowing embers was some of the coke slightly blackened.

At the end of the morning shift, the union leader descended from the loading platform and announced the results so far: They had produced three and a half tons of iron at a ratio of eight kilos of iron for one kilo of coke, or an average of one and one-fifth tons per hour. Previously they were only able to get five kilos of iron for one kilo of coke, or eight hundred kilos per hour. And if the furnace smelted more than five tons in a day she would begin to shit.

Sun looked as if he was going to cry with happiness. "Tsao, old man," he said, embracing him, "you've done a great thing for our plant!"

"We're all working for our own family," replied Tsao with a smile. "That's the way it should be."

Seated glumly by himself, Yu was torn by conflicting emotions. Although he was glad that the furnace

was smelting again, he felt that his stubborn refusal to listen to Tsao had made him completely lose face. And even worse, he thought miserably, my twenty years' experience is worth nothing!

Observing his woebegone air, the plant manager approached him. His words combined criticism and encouragement. "You've been with this furnace a long time and you've gained a great deal of experience. But you rely on that experience too closely to move from it one iota. You saw what happened here today? You must accept new ideas and study everything new. It just won't do any more to cling blindly to the old ways!"

That night Tsao and Sun and a couple of other workers made some further modifications of the tuyère openings. As a result, the following morning they were able to smelt 10.7 kilos of iron per kilo of coke. Although the furnace produced one ton eight hundred kilos per hour, or seven tons per day, it did not get red-hot. There was no necessity to scrape out the slag, as it flowed out easily once the hole was opened.

According to the calculations of the plant manager, they could now not only smelt two more tons of iron per day than before, but they saved the labour of four workers and 520 kilos of coke.

A meeting, held in Tsao's honour, was attended by the entire plant. The men were urged to emulate him and make bold innovations. Although our plant is small and lacks the up-to-date equipment of the factories in the big cities, said one of the speakers, as long as we all put our minds to our problems, our production record should be quite respectable.

To express thanks, Tsao gave a party the same evening for all the blast furnace workers. The union leader and Yu were also invited, but the latter persistently refused to appear.

"I can't do anything with him," said Li. "He's playing as hard to get as a young girl."

Tsao thought a moment, and then said, "I'll go to get him. The old-timer just has to come!" And sure enough, he returned, smiling, a few minutes later, with Yu.

The foreman's face was red with embarrassment and he laughed self-consciously. "To tell the truth, I really have no right to be here," he said.

"Then do you give in this time?" asked the union leader, as he politely led the old man to a seat.

"I give in!"

Grabbing a fistful of candy, Tsao placed it in Yu's hand. "Please eat," he entreated. "Young fellows like me are too quick on the trigger. I hope you'll forgive our mistakes, because we'll be studying under you for a long time."

"Aiya, don't say that," replied the old man hastily. "I'm the one who should be blamed."

"The fault was mine, too," Tsao insisted. "When I first came, I had words with you because I felt you didn't think much of me. When I saw what was wrong with the furnace, I didn't make a sound, but just stood around and laughed." He turned towards the union leader. "I still was mixed up then. I wanted to earn my pay and that's all. But I'm straightened out now —this place belongs to us, the workers, and we're all one family."

There was complete silence, as Tsao paused. Then, he continued, "Though I understand this much, it's still not enough. I want to learn more. If everyone hadn't helped, I couldn't have fixed the furnace. We're all in the same family...and I hope the old foreman isn't angry with me!" And Tsao gave Yu a deep respectful bow.

"Here, here! What are you doing?" protested the old man, flustered, quickly returning several obeisances.

Everyone laughed, and the strained atmosphere melted away.

At work the next morning, the men smiled with satisfaction at the sound of molten metal bubbling merrily in the repaired furnace. And they went about their tasks with the added competence of their strengthened comradeship and unity.

August 31, 1949

New Times, New Methods

by Ku Yu

Ku Yu is a native of Wuyi County, Hopei Province. He was born in 1928 to a fairly well-to-do peasant family. During the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression, he studied at a mobile primary school in the county which was then already liberated. In 1944 he studied at the county's normal school. Joining the Cultural Troupe of the Southern Hopei District at a later date, he started to write short stories about the War of Resistance for the journal "Workers, Peasants and Fighters." During the agrarian reform, he produced more literary works. The encouragement shown him by readers strengthened his determination to pursue a literary career. Among his works are "One Meal with the Youth League Members," "The Pledge," etc. At present he is studying in the Central Literary Research Institute of Peking.

When Wang's mother and the girl's father saw how the young people felt about each other, they made no objection to the marriage. Wang was a fine, strapping boy who was going to work in the district government. The girl Feng-lan was known to everybody as a sturdy and capable worker in the fields. All the peasants liked both of them and thought they were an excellent match.

They came from two different villages, but there was only a little stream to cross to go from one to the other. During their engagement, Wang found always reasons to come and see Feng-lan. So, before long, the old women in the two villages began gossiping about his frequent visits.

"For two engaged young people to be together like that all the time," they said, "is too 'modern'!"

In the days before the wedding, Feng-lan's father kept calculating how much grain he should sell to get the dowry for his daughter. One fine morning, he got up very early and tied several full sacks to his wheelbarrow. He planned to go to the city after breakfast, sell the grain in the market-place and buy some things for Feng-lan with the money. But when he was about to leave, his daughter stopped him.

"Pa," she said, "what are you going to do? We had a hard enough time saving a little grain this year! Didn't everybody agree at the village meeting to keep about five *tou*[1] of grain in reserve until the wheat harvest?"

Her father set down the wheelbarrow and filled his pipe.

"Ever since you were old enough to work, you have toiled hard for our family. I only want to do what's right by you, Feng-lan." Pa was so moved he found it difficult to speak. He smoked in silence for a moment, then continued. "I was figuring on buying you four sets of clothing—two of good cotton cloth, two of printed material; a few pieces of the necessary furniture, a kettle, some bowls, a mirror, some face powder, and so on. What do you think? Wouldn't you like things like that?"

Feng-lan laughed and started to unload the sacks from the barrow, while her father stared at her, amazed.

"Don't you remember what Wang said, pa?" she asked. "He told us not to spend anything. Won't I live with his family? Is there a family in the liberated areas that doesn't have all the necessary furniture? What do we need extra chairs and tables for? They won't help us pull a plough or plant. And clothes of printed cloth—when would I have a chance to wear

1 One *tou* is about one peck.

them? It's not like the old days when a wife wasn't allowed to work in the fields for three years after her marriage! After I become a member of Wang's family, I must help them with work in the fields. I won't have any time to put powder on my face! Wang is a cadre, a government worker. He certainly wouldn't approve of those things, and I don't want them!"

Pa sat on a step in the compound, his brow wrinkled and head lowered in thought, while Feng-lan returned the sacks full of grain to the shed. "If we don't sell the grain," he said when she returned, "then let's sell our young ox. We don't need two draught animals. . . ."

"There's even more reason not to sell the young ox!" Feng-lan retorted. "I raised it, right from the time it was born. It's a year old now, and we'll be able to use it soon. How can you sell it? Wang doesn't have any ox. Where can I borrow one when we plough, except from you?"

Pa was at a loss to answer his daughter's arguments. He was afraid that the peasants who still followed the old customs would laugh at him, but he couldn't think of any alternative.

On the day set for the wedding, Wang's mother awoke at cock's crow. She dressed angrily and went into the room where her son was sleeping. This would also be the bride's room after the wedding, and where the gifts and dowry should be displayed before the ceremony. "Get up!" she shouted. "How can you sleep? The place looks as if we had just held a wake!" Fairly panting with fury, she plumped down beside him on the *kang*.[1]

Wang rubbed his eyes drowsily and sat up. "It's not dawn yet, ma," he yawned. "What are you doing

1 See footnote 2 on page 4.

up so early?"

"How can I sleep! I ask you—does our house look like there's going to be a wedding?"

"You mean because there's no bridal chair outside the door? Aya! Mother, nobody uses them any more nowadays! Everybody is busy trying to work harder and get better harvests. Who has time to bother about sedan-chairs! Besides, I am a cadre. If even the peasants don't want such things any more, how could I still go for all that feudal junk?"

"What are you talking about! Your mother's head isn't made of elm wood!" she retorted in a fury, pounding the reed mat on the *kang* with her fist. "I don't care if the bride doesn't come in a sedan-chair! What I don't understand is why, with her family so well off, they haven't sent even one little thing! When I got married, your grandmother sold her very cooking pots to buy me a chest. . . ." The old woman was choking with rage.

Her son tried his best to pacify her. "Ma, we haven't had any famine here, but plenty of other places have been hit badly and we must help them. We all have to save! If Feng-lan's father sells grain to buy her a dowry, what'll they do in the spring time?"

Ma seemed not to have heard a word he said. She muttered to herself for a while, then burst out again.

"A fine thing!" she sputtered. "Too stingy to give even a thing no bigger than a finger! The women will be here at noon to see the dowry, and my face will be as red as red can be! I may come from a poor family, but still I'm not used to this sort of thing!"

"These are new times," replied Wang. "Why keep harping on the old ceremonies? Our family doesn't even have an ox. If Feng-lan brought two big dowry chests painted bright red, could they pull a plough or do

our sowing?"

"You only talk about working the land!" shouted ma, stubborn and unconvinced. "Do you think I've lived half my life without understanding what the land needs? Of course, we have to work on it! But, still we should gain a little face! A big event like this happens only once in a life-time!"

By this time, it was already broad daylight. Wang washed, and put on his clothes.

"Ma," he said. "Today, the greatest face-giver *is* productive work! It's not like before. Later on, when we all have a better life, it won't be too late for Feng-lan's father to buy us some pretty things, if we want them." "Stupid!" scoffed the old woman. "After the bride gets here, do you think he'll buy her anything?" "I'm marrying the girl," retorted Wang impatiently, "not her presents!" Ma was cut to the quick. "You two can have your wedding without me!" she said hotly. "I'm going to spend the next few days at your grandmother's!"

Rushing out of the door, she ran full tilt into Chu the village head who was just about to knock. He had been on his way to the meeting-hall where the wedding ceremony was to take place, to hang up a set of congratulatory scrolls. But, half-way down the road, he had heard mother and son quarrelling loudly, and had come near when he collided with the old woman. Panting and red in the face, the old woman poured out her grievances to the village head.

"You've got it all wrong," Chu said soothingly, and then added, with a grin, "For instance: Suppose there were two brides—one with trunks full of gifts and bedding, but who didn't know how to work; the other, who could bring nothing but a pair of very capable hands—which one would you choose?"

Now calming down, ma smiled and said: "Country people always want those who can work hard! What's the use of asking such a question?"

After breakfast, the hall, in which the wedding ceremony was to be held, was decorated very attractively. The walls were adorned with the scrolls of good wishes, and Chairman Mao's photograph was hung in the centre. Gifts had arrived also from the district government. The peasants jammed in so tightly there wasn't even space for a drop of water! Every guest was staring so hard, it seemed one pair of eyes could not possibly be enough for a person! Men and women, the young and the old, all talked cheerfully.

One old woman bustled about asking, "Why haven't I seen the bride yet? They're not using a sedan-chair, are they? It's just as well! When I got married, riding in the sedan-chair made me dizzy! Not only that it was expensive, it made me suffer, too! This way is much better. They save money and it's still quite proper!"

Another chatter-box rushed up to Wang's mother. "Where are you showing the bride's dowry?" she inquired.

Ma turned scarlet. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. So she pretended not to have heard and avoided the questioner from then on.

The musicians blew a flourish when Feng-lan arrived, without her father, according to rural custom. Chu the village head stood up to welcome her and to officiate at the ceremony, and the people crowded towards him like a swarm of bees. The chairman of the village women's association managed with some difficulty to tow Feng-lan through the mass of guests.

The bride wore a jacket of ordinary blue cloth, and a pair of trousers to match; around her head she had wound the usual printed cloth of the peasant. She sat

down beside Wang, her eyes shining with happiness. The guests pushed and craned their necks to get a better look at her, and all the children present clapped their hands.

"Quiet, now, friends!" shouted Chu. "We're going to start. First, I want to say that Wang and Feng-lan have chosen one another of their own free will. They were working together and were impressed each with the other's abilities. They fell in love and decided to get married. You all know how good a hand Feng-lan is at work in the fields. She heeded our Government's call for economy and for increased agricultural output, so she didn't spend money foolishly on a dowry. . . ."

"Let the bride tell us how they fell in love with each other," interrupted one of the young peasants with a shout. "Let her act it out!" Other guests, laughing, took up the cry.

In the midst of all this noisy gaiety, a man of about forty with a neat black moustache came into the courtyard, leading a young ox. It was Lo, the head of Feng-lan's village, and the bridegroom came forward to greet him.

"Why have you brought the ox?" Wang asked.

"It's Feng-lan's dowry," Lo answered with a smile. Then he called out to Wang's mother: "Come and see the gift the bride's father has sent!"

The old woman hastened into the courtyard. When she saw a stranger with the sleek and fat young ox, she didn't know what to make of it.

"This ox used to belong to Feng-lan's family," Lo explained. "Now that Feng-lan is marrying Wang, she's going to live and work with you people. Her father knows you have no draught animal and that it's hard for you to plough without one. So he sends this young ox as a dowry. . . ."

Wang's mother had never owned an ox in her life;

now she put her hand forward shyly to pat the animal's head. The young ox switched its tail unconcernedly and pawed the ground with the front hoofs. Its woolly coat was brown, but its chest was white. One could see at a glance how strong and useful this lovely young animal would prove!

The old woman's toothless mouth stood wide open while she was laughing for sheer joy. But, suddenly, a disturbing thought crossed her mind:

"My son doesn't work at home and I've never taken care of an ox," she said worriedly. "This animal will give us a lot of trouble!"

The peasants all laughed and Chu said: "You certainly have gone silly in your happiness! Have you forgotten that your new daughter-in-law is a model worker?"

"Feng-lan raised this young ox herself," explained Lo.

Some elders gathered round to admire the animal. They looked it in the mouth, examined its hoofs and patted its woolly rump. Approval of the gift ox was unanimous.

Nor did the peasants forget to give credit to the girl who had raised the yearling. "A model worker certainly does things in a model way!" they commented.

"We, in this village, can consider ourselves lucky with the addition of such a fine new worker," the chairman of the women's association said to some of the members. "Now we can swing into productive work with a will!"

"Why didn't we ever think of such a dowry?" one of the women wondered. "When we got married, the things we brought along were so dead and useless! You couldn't compare them with a live gift like this one that can serve a good purpose!"

In all this joy and merriment, the guests insisted

that Wang's mother make a speech. "Your family has grown by one person," they laughed. "You must say something at this happy occasion!" They helped the old woman forward until she was facing her son and new daughter-in-law.

Beaming, ma looked at Wang, at Feng-lan and at the friends crowding around them. Her heart grew lighter and lighter within her. Finally she said: "Although my mind is old-fashioned, I'm beginning to understand. In these new times, we must have new ways. . . ."

Her words were greeted with a roar of approving laughter and applause.

And people have been talking about that new-style marriage ever since.

March 1950

Registration

by Chao Shu-li

Chao Shu-li was born into a peasant family in Shansi Province in the year 1905.

He turned to literature in 1926, trying his hand at stories which were later published in a small newspaper in his native province.

When the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression broke out in 1937, he joined the local administrative work of the anti-Japanese government as district head. Later, he was made the editor of the literary column of several anti-Japanese newspapers.

His real literary career, however, started only in 1943. His writings since include "Hsiao Erh-hei's Marriage," "Rhymes of Li Yu-tsai," "Changes in Li Village" and "Registration," to mention only a few.

Young friends, I'm going to tell you a new story, and it all begins with a "Lohan coin." Thirty years ago I wouldn't have had to explain what a Lohan coin was, but today it's probably necessary.

They say that it was minted in the 17th century during the reign of Emperor Kang Hsi (1662-1723) of the Manchu (Ching) dynasty. It was the same size as other coins of that period, but the copper in it had a special sheen that looked like gold. Some people claim that a gold image of Lohan was mixed in with the molten metal used for the coinage, and as a result each piece contained thirty per cent gold. We don't care whether that theory is true, the fact is the coins were very attractive. Many's the person who took five Lohans to the goldsmith and had a ring made. If you saw the ring worn on somebody's finger, you'd swear it was the real thing.

But not many coins were minted, and they were hard to get hold of. Even when they still were in circulation, clever children, watching every coin that came into the house, were lucky if they could find one a year. Young peasant lads with an eye for pretty things liked to hold a Lohan in their mouths—just the way some city dwellers enjoy having a gold tooth. Right up to today there are a few out-of-the-way places where that habit still exists. Anyhow, the coins don't circulate any more. Whoever's got one won't let it out of his hands. And now let's get to the story:

In a village, bearing the name of his family, there lives a carpenter called Chang and his good wife Lovely Moth. They have a daughter Ai-ai who was nineteen on the Lantern Festival of 1950. She and a boy by the name of Wan fell in love. Our tale starts with these two young people.

Listening to me tell this story, you friends with an impatient nature may think I'm an amateur. Perhaps you say, "You talk a lot about the Lohan coin, but when you come to the characters involved you're very brief. In that case, you'll probably finish the story in five minutes!" It's not really going to be like that at all. It's just that some things have to be explained sooner and some things later. But enough of idle chatter. Let me continue:

The Chang family lived alone in the compound of one-storey buildings with a square yard in the centre. Chang and his wife occupied the northern building. Their daughter Ai-ai slept in the west wing. On the Lantern Festival holiday this year (1950), the village was gay with dragon-lantern games. The carpenter was an expert manipulator of the tail of the big cloth dragon. The evening our story opens, he left the house right after dinner to play his usual role in the dragon dance.

After she finished washing the pots and bowls, Ai-ai went out with her mother. The women locked the compound gate and strolled through the village to watch the fun.

Each member of the family went their separate ways. Chang joined the dragon dance; Lovely Moth mingled with her friends and neighbours; Ai-ai watched the fireworks because they were being set off by young Wan.

Ai-ai was the first to go home. While waiting for her mother's return, she fell asleep on Lovely Moth's bed. A little later, Lovely Moth came back and gently shook the sleeping girl.

"Ai-ai, wake up!" she whispered.

But her daughter only rolled over on her side. As she turned, a small bright object slipped out of her pocket and fell tinkling to the floor. Lovely Moth picked it up and examined it in the lamplight.

"That girl!" she muttered. "When did she get hold of my Lohan coin?"

The coin originally had been locked in her jewel box in a chest. Wanting to return the Lohan to its hiding place, Lovely Moth took her keys and opened the chest and the box. But there was her coin just as she had left it! She compared it with Ai-ai's. Except for the fact that the gleam of Lovely Moth's talisman was a little duller, the coins were identical!

She glanced at her slumbering daughter. "Silly girl!" she said softly. "So you've done it too! You've given him your ring for it!" She looked at Ai-ai's slim fingers. They were bare. Lightly, she groped in the girl's pocket. It was empty except for a thimble.

"Ah!" sighed Lovely Moth. "Mother and daughter both exchanged their rings for Lohan coins!" She shook her head. "I must see the matchmaker Aunty Wu the first thing in the morning and settle Ai-ai's engage-

ment. We can't let this thing go any further!" She put the thimble back in the pocket.

Lovely Moth sat staring at the two Lohans, as she recalled the history of her own coin.

Now this I absolutely have to explain. And in order to give you a clear picture of the background of her Lohan, I must go back over twenty years to the time she married Chang the carpenter.

"Lovely Moth" was the stage name of an actress of a local theatrical troupe, who was popular for her charm. The first day the carpenter's wife entered his house, one of the guests discovered her close resemblance to the actress and called her Lovely Moth. Since then the nickname has stuck to her.

Chang was completely entranced by his beautiful bride and didn't leave the house for nine days after their wedding. He did everything in his power to make her happy and amuse her. But Lovely Moth was unresponsive to all his tricks and antics. Even when he put on her flowered gown and made up like a woman, she only said coldly, "Stop acting the fool!"

A few months later, a piece of scandal reached Chang Village from the nearby village of East Wang, the bride's native place. The story was that before her marriage, Lovely Moth had been intimate with a young fellow named Pao. The youths in Chang Village ribbed the carpenter unmercifully.

"Little carpenter, when you go home you better cough before you go in the door! You don't want to bump into Pao!"

"What makes you think Lovely Moth is yours? Pao owns at least half of her!"

Chang said nothing but he understood why his bride showed so little interest in him. Several times he wanted to have it out with her, but each time he weaken-

ed. What's past is past, he thought. As long as she behaves herself from now on. . . .

But when the news came to the ears of his mother, the old lady took him aside and berated him as "spineless." "You have to give her a good beating!" she insisted firmly. "People learn only through pain and suffering! That's the only way she'll reform! If you're too soft about it, she'll make you a laughing-stock! . . . "

Chang was convinced. From that day, he just waited for the time and the excuse.

Not long after, he had some business in East Wang. There he met Pao and noticed that the young man wore a ring identical with the one that adorned Lovely Moth's finger.

"Mother's—!" he swore to himself. "She really is one-half Pao's!" When Chang got back he reported what he had seen to his mother.

"Hurry up and beat her!" ordered the old lady. "Give it to her hard! No other way will do!"

She continued to egg him on until Chang was seething with rage. He grasped a heavy iron poker and started for the door. His mother stopped him.

"You can't use that," she cautioned. "Put it down! Something thin will hurt just as much and won't break any bones! Here, take this stick!" The old lady handed him a cane a foot and a half long, no thicker than a finger.

How did she know so much about the technique of wife-beating? Well, when she was young she had had an affair like Lovely Moth, and her husband had used just such a stick on her.

But to continue—Chang took the cane and left his mother's quarters. With a face as black as a thundercloud, he crossed the courtyard to the room where he

lived with his bride. Lovely Moth's greeting was with her usual polite reserve.

"What are you doing with that stick?" she asked curiously.

Chang pointed with it at her hand. "What happened to the mate to that ring?" he demanded menacingly.

The hair on Lovely Moth's scalp stood on end. She raised her head and stared at her husband. He looked as if he was ready to eat her alive. She was frightened speechless. Chang whipped the stick a cutting blow across her thigh. Lovely Moth cried out in surprise and pain. She had been tenderly raised and no one had ever struck her.

Her husband seized her by the hair and dragged her to the bed. Flinging her face down, he yanked off her trousers. Whack! Whack! Whack!... Chang flailed the cane whistling against her quivering flesh.

At first she tried not to cry out. She was afraid her screams would bring the neighbours and that they would laugh to see her in this state. But when the beating went on and on, she wanted to cry but couldn't. She could only gasp and squirm, for the cruel stick whirled too fast.

Finally, exhausted, Chang flung the cane aside and stalked out. Every nerve in Lovely Moth's body seemed drawn to her exposed place. She lay panting and moaning, unable to move. Her head was drenched with perspiration as if it had been dunked in a pot of hot soup. It was many minutes before her alternate gasps and sobs blended into loud outraged weeping.

But no one could hear her outside the walls of the small compound. Chang had gone and her mother-in-law didn't even come to look at her. Instead, from another wing, the old lady merely railed sarcastically,

"What are you crying about? Do you want everyone to come and see the fine show you're putting on?"

After a while, Lovely Moth was able to control herself. Her buttocks were lacerated and raw. When she reached back and touched them gingerly, her hand came away stained with blood. Gritting her teeth, she pulled up her trousers.

Chang never asked her again why she had given a ring to Pao. Naturally, she didn't offer to tell him. Before her marriage, Lovely Moth had been in love with Pao. When she went to spend the Dragon Boat Festival with her parents after she had married Chang, she met Pao. She presented him with the ring and he gave her his Lohan coin, for old time's sake. The coin became more precious to her than ever after the beating.

Now her apathy towards Chang turned to dread; she recoiled from him as from a wild beast. Lovely Moth trembled each time she had to speak to him and he never saw her smile. When the carpenter entered the compound gate at the end of a day's work, sometimes he would catch a glimpse of her, vibrant and gay like her namesake on the stage, shooing the chickens back to their coop. But the minute she saw him, something within her seemed to die. Dully and properly, she would go into the house, without a word.

On one such occasion, Chang angrily followed her to their room. "People call you 'Lovely Moth,'" he shouted. "How is it that your wings droop as soon as you set eyes on me! What am I anyway!" He slapped her sharply across the face.

Thereafter, fear of her husband's temper made her try to smile at him when they met. But the smiles were so pathetically forced that it would have been better if she hadn't tried in the first place. Chang was unhappy and gradually lost interest in her. He took work

in other villages which frequently kept him away from home a year on end. It was rumoured that he found consolation in the arms of many other women.

The only company Lovely Moth had during the carpenter's absence was her mother-in-law, and the old lady never spoke to her if she could help it. Lovely Moth's parents lived in a village quite nearby but Pao lived there too. Because of the suspicion she was under, she didn't dare go to visit them. After her parents learned of her disgrace, they were too ashamed to come to see her. The result was that Lovely Moth was left friendless and alone. Her life became divided between taking care of her mother-in-law and playing with the Lohan coin.

Every night, after the old lady went to bed, Lovely Moth would retire to her room and lock the door. Then she would take out the coin and look at it.

"Lohan," she would often whisper, "you're the cause of my downfall, but you're my saviour too! I'll die before I part with you!"

There were times when she played with the coin like a child. She would warm it in the palm of her hand, imprint it on her cheek, press it against her bosom, hold it in her mouth. . . . Except during Chang's rare brief stays at home, Lovely Moth never slept without it. Only after Ai-ai was born did she lock the Lohan coin in her jewel box. There it joined the ring she had put away after she was beaten.

The year Ai-ai was fifteen, Lovely Moth was looking through the jewel box to find a bauble to sew on her daughter's hat. Standing beside her, Ai-ai was attracted by the ring and began to toy with it. To ward off the possibility of Ai-ai's wanting to explore the box any further and perhaps discovering the Lohan coin, Lovely Moth made her a present of the ring and hastily locked the jewel case.

By then, the carpenter and his wife were on fairly good terms. Their daughter was grown up, Chang's mother was dead, and Lovely Moth had long since broken off her relations with Pao. Ai-ai was their only child. Playing and joking with the girl had brought them closer together. When Chang noticed Lovely Moth's ring on Ai-ai's finger he felt safe to comment on it in his wife's presence.

"That ring used to be one of a pair," he said drily to Ai-ai.

"What happened to the other one?"

"Ask your mother."

Ai-ai caught the flashing glance which Lovely Moth shot at Chang. Assuming that her mother was being teased for having lost the other ring, she asked no more questions.

That is how one of Lovely Moth's most prized possessions came to be worn by Ai-ai. The girl cherished her mother's gift and was never seen without it—until that night three years later during the Lantern Festival in 1950 when Lovely Moth discovered that the ring was missing from Ai-ai's finger. When, in addition, a Lohan dropped from the pocket of the sleeping girl, her mother's shock was almost unbearable.

Sunk in the bitter-sweet memories which her own coin evoked—the ecstasy, the pain—Lovely Moth worried what to do about Ai-ai's talisman. She stared at the two Lohans. Good or bad, she thought, my experiences are past. Shall I take Ai-ai's coin—her love token? How do I know how much she's suffered for it already? Give it back to her? How can I let her tread my thorny path?

Still unable to make up her mind, the slam of the compound gate broke the train of her meditations. It was past midnight, and Chang had come home from

the dragon dance. She put both Lohans in her jewel box and locked it quickly, just as the carpenter entered. Seeing Ai-ai still sleeping on Lovely Moth's bed, Chang grumbled that the girl was being spoiled. He wakened his daughter and sent her back to her own room. Then he locked the door and started to undress.

"The past two years many matches were offered for our Ai-ai," he whispered, "but you turned them all down. What about the latest one Aunty Wu introduced? We'd better get the girl married soon—the village is full of gossip about her. She and her friend Yen-yen are the only eligible girls who haven't married and they both have the reputation of attracting trouble. Now Yen-yen is about to become a bride, that'll leave only our Ai-ai!"

"Didn't the village officials refuse to give Yen-yen and young Chin an official letter of introduction to the district registrar?" asked Lovely Moth. "Did they change their minds?"

"No, they still think she's a trouble-maker. After the way she's been carrying on with Chin, of course they won't write it. Aunty Wu is making the match for a boy in the village of West Wang. They're going down to ask for the letter the day after tomorrow."

"It seems to me that the people in our administration are hypocrites. They don't know what's proper and what's not," said Lovely Moth heatedly. "If our Ai-ai has such a bad reputation, how is it that we received so many proposals for her? Why did the civil clerk ask Aunty Wu to try to make a match for her with his own nephew?"

"What kind of a family does the nephew come from?"

"I don't really know much about them except that they live in the same village as my mother. Aunty Wu

is going there tomorrow. I can go to visit my mother and at the same time drop in on them."

"That's a good idea," approved Chang. After a brief silence, he said hesitantly, "I must ask you a question, not a very nice one—Is there anything between our Ai-ai and young Wan?"

Lovely Moth had no intention of telling him what she knew about the Lohan coin. "Let's not bother about that," she said evasively. "The girl is grown up and we must find her a husband. Then there won't be any trouble!"

Just like her mother at her age, from the time she got the Lohan coin Ai-ai couldn't sleep without it. When she reached her room, she put her hand in her pocket for the coin. It was gone. Holding the oil lamp low, she searched the floor. There was no responding gleam to the flickering lamplight.

The next morning, after a restless night, Ai-ai was the first one up. She took a broom and began to sweep the house thoroughly, room by room. No luck. Ai-ai moped despondently for about an hour. Then the click of a door latch told her that her parents were awake. Seizing her broom she barged into their room. With much diligence and vigour, she swept every inch of the floor—even under the beds.

Lovely Moth knew her daughter was looking for the Lohan and that the search was useless. But she only smiled and said, "My Ai-ai certainly is working like a good girl today."

After breakfast, Aunty Wu came to invite Lovely Moth to visit with her the home of Ai-ai's proposed groom. According to his habit of twenty years' standing, Chang announced that he would go along.

This habit began from the time he discovered that Lovely Moth had given a ring to Pao. It was then it became clear to Chang that Lovely Moth didn't love

him, and his feelings towards his wife had changed. But each time she went to see her mother, he acted as if he were still mad about her. He escorted her every step of way to East Wang and back. And the habit remained till this day.

"Don't you trust me yet?" Lovely Moth once asked him.

"I've gotten used to this way," said the carpenter. "Let's keep it as it is."

And so, on this morning, it was agreed that Chang would make the trip with the two women. Lovely Moth invited Ai-ai to join them.

"I'd rather not," said the girl. "We saw grandma only two weeks ago."

"Stay home then and take care of the house for me," said Chang. "Don't go flying about the village!"

The moment they were gone, Ai-ai resumed her search for the missing coin. Never dreaming that it was locked in her mother's jewel box, she carefully retraced her steps of the night before. By noon she still hadn't seen even a hint of the precious Lohan. Ai-ai was too miserable to feel like preparing lunch. She toasted and ate a couple of slices of steamed bread.

As she was gloomily munching, young Wan walked in. Ai-ai urgently grasped his hand.

"The Lohan coin is gone!"

"If it's lost, it's lost."

"I was so upset I could hardly eat."

"What's there to be upset about? What good will it do? I heard that your father and mother have gone off with that old matchmaker to get you a husband. Is that true?"

"It won't do them any good!"

"Why not?"

"I won't agree!"

"What can you do about it?"

"Let them try!"

The sound of someone approaching the house was heard and the youngsters immediately fell silent. Their faces lit up when Yen-yen, the other girl "trouble-maker" in the village, came in. Ai-ai greeted her warmly.

Finding the pair alone, Yen-yen laughed. "Pardon me! I'd better be going!"

Ai-ai smiled without answering. She placed her hands on Yen-yen's shoulders and firmly pressed her down on a bench.

"How are you two getting on?" asked Yen-yen. "Have you thought of a plan yet?"

"We were just talking about it," said Ai-ai.

Yen-yen looked at them with red rimmed eyes. "Hurry up," she urged. "Don't be useless like me, and delay!" She began to cry softly.

The hearts of Ai-ai and Wan ached for her. There was a painful silence.

"Have you applied yet?" Wan asked Yen-yen.

"Tomorrow!"

"What kind of a boy is he?" asked Ai-ai.

"I haven't even seen his shadow!"

"Can't you get out of it?" Ai-ai persisted.

Yen-yen sighed. "My mother says she'll kill herself if I don't agree! What can I do?"

"Why did the village administration office refuse to give you and Chin a letter last December?" queried Ai-ai. "What reason did they give?"

"Reason!" sniffed Yen-yen. "The reason was that the civil clerk has a dead brain. He said we had a bad reputation! Not only wouldn't he write a letter of recommendation, he told me to criticize myself!"

"When you go down tomorrow, won't the clerk tell you to criticize yourself again?" asked Wan.

"They don't need me to go. As long as the parents

agree, any one can go for the letter. If you really want freedom of marriage, you'll receive criticism instead of the letter. And yet they say they're opposed to parents controlling marriages!"

"It looks like we're finished," Wan said to Ai-ai. "In the first place, the one Aunty Wu is introducing is the civil clerk's nephew. Secondly, your mother is going to approve him. Today she'll come back and start to work on you and tomorrow you'll be registered at the district government office!"

"My mother won't work on me," said Ai-ai firmly, "because she's afraid I'll raise a fuss!"

Outside, a voice was heard calling, "Uncle Chang, Uncle Chang!" The footsteps of the visitor came crunching across the compound.

"It's Chin, coming looking for you!" whispered Ai-ai to Yen-yen. Before Yen-yen had the chance to reply, young Chin rushed into the room.

For several days Yen-yen had been wanting to see him and pour out her troubles, but she had been kept too busy at home. When her lover entered, she sat beside Ai-ai on the bed to give him her place on the bench. Yen-yen stared at him. She didn't know where to begin. Chin paid no attention to her, nor did he sit down.

"Where's Uncle Chang?" he asked Ai-ai. "The boys are all out in the threshing ground. We'd like to ask him to teach us how to play the dragon."

"He went to my grandmother's. Have a seat."

"I'm busy!" He glanced coldly at Yen-yen and went out. In the courtyard, he turned and shouted, "Wan! Come along and play! Why waste your time? Tell your father to spend a few bushels of rice and get you a girl! There are plenty around!" He disappeared through the compound gate.

Yen-yen threw herself down on the bed and sobbed.

For a while, all of Ai-ai and Wan's soothing couldn't stem her tears. At last she stopped crying.

"You two must think of a way not to be broken apart," Yen-yen said fiercely. "You see how awful it is!"

"What do you want us to do?" said Ai-ai. "Every grown-up in the village is so old-fashioned—none of them is willing to help us. I can't even find anybody who'll speak to my mother for me."

"No one says a good word for us," Wan added. "Not a day goes by without some old duffer telling my father: 'Better get the boy properly engaged soon. Don't put it off any longer!' "

Angrily, Yen-yen sat bolt upright. "I'll be the one to bring you together!" she vowed. "I'll speak to your parents for you!" She gripped Ai-ai's hand. "You and I are the 'bad' girls in this village. Well, I'm not going to let them do to you what they've done to me!"

Wan jumped to his feet. "Yen-yen, I salute you! Even if you don't succeed, we can't be any worse off than we are already. Anything is better than just dangling like this. It's settled then. I have to go." He grinned at the girls as he departed. "I don't want the civil clerk to see me here and tell you to criticize yourselves again!"

The girls feverishly began making their plans—who should say what to whom; what to do if Aunty Wu convinced Lovely Moth about the civil clerk's nephew. In the middle of the strategy conference, Ai-ai's mother returned with the matchmaker. Aunty Wu was still working hard to sell her choice of a groom for Ai-ai.

"No matter how you look at it," she chattered rapidly, "whether from the point of view of the boy or his family, there's nothing wrong with any of them. His mother is our civil clerk's sister, and you know what a fine disposition she has! Ai-ai would be well treated in

that family! You must be sure to make the right decision!"

"I think you've said enough," replied Lovely Moth brusquely. "Let me talk this over with Ai-ai's father."

Aware that it wouldn't do any good to keep pressing for an immediate answer, the old matchmaker politely took her leave. Ai-ai beamed happily.

Why was Lovely Moth so unwilling? Let me tell you what happened when she and her husband went with Aunty Wu to East Wang. The matchmaker wanted to go directly to the family of the proposed groom, but Lovely Moth disagreed.

"It won't look good if we call on them together," she said. "You go there first, while Chang and I visit my mother. I'll come a little later, saying that I'm calling for you so that we can keep each other company on the trip back to our village. I don't want them to think that we're keen on making the match!"

When Aunty Wu reached the house of the intended in-laws, only the parents were at home. The boy himself was out playing somewhere. After a few minutes of casual conversation, the father came to the point.

"Last time you mentioned three girls. Now which one do you really think is the best?"

"In my opinion, they're all about the same," replied Aunty Wu. "But two of them have already found husbands. That leaves only Lovely Moth's daughter."

"How did it happen so quickly?"

"Eighteen and nineteen-year-old girls never stay single very long."

"I told you to hurry and make up your mind," the mother berated her husband. "But not you! You had to be slow, and delay! Now the good ones are already picked!"

"There are still plenty of younger girls," said Aunty Wu slyly. "What do you say to one about fourteen or fifteen? Anyhow, that's older than your son."

The mother bridled indignantly. "Don't joke about this, Aunty! If we wanted a girl that young, we wouldn't have had to bother you!"

"Why do you say the good ones are picked already?" demanded the matchmaker. "What's the matter with Lovely Moth's daughter? If you ask me, she's by far the prettiest of the three. I think you've seen her—isn't she just as lovely as her mother was twenty years ago?"

"She's not bad-looking," the woman admitted, "but we hear her reputation's not so good."

"If it weren't for that slight fault do you think at eighteen she'd still be unmarried? And weren't the other two girls just the same?"

"But since she has that fault, won't we be spending money just to buy ourselves a bag of trouble?"

"You shouldn't listen to all that silly gossip. If there was anything seriously wrong with the girl would your brother the civil clerk ask me to make the match? What does a little fault like that mean, anyhow? After she's married, you can correct it."

"How are we going to correct it? Like mother, like daughter. Lovely Moth always was a hussy!"

"Of course it can be corrected! Pain is the best teacher! You'll give her a good hard beating and that'll be the end of it!"

"She was born with the trait," said the husband doubtfully. "Can we beat it out of her?"

"Why not?" replied Aunty Wu. "Didn't Chang's cane do the job when he married Lovely Moth?"

It was at this point in the discussion that Lovely Moth entered the courtyard. She overheard the matchmaker's last remark and stopped in her tracks. Seeing that no one else was around, she turned and quietly left the courtyard.

"So the beating is to be passed from generation to generation, is it?" she fumed inwardly. "Not if I can help it! I don't need you to teach my daughter!" Lovely Moth returned to her mother's house.

"Well, what about it?" asked Chang and her mother simultaneously.

"No good! The boy won't do!" snapped Lovely Moth. When her mother and husband pressed her for a reason, she said shortly, "Let's not talk about it. The boy isn't suitable!"

Lovely Moth's mother wanted to know why she looked so angry.

"It's nothing," said Lovely Moth. "I didn't get enough rest last night." She went into the next room to take a nap.

But how could she sleep? The words of Aunty Wu had opened her old wound. Would she ever rid herself of the burden of her past? Why should we, mother and daughter, have fates so alike? she thought. I don't know what evil spirit possessed me as a girl and made me exchange my ring for a Lohan coin. Because of that I was half beaten to death. Even now, I'm still treated like a criminal—the moment I step out of the door, Chang escorts me the way a jailor escorts a prisoner. Now it's all going to happen to Ai-ai. It's a curse on the women in our family! Mother and daughter both fall in the same snare! Poor silly girl! All her life your mother hasn't been able to escape—must you be so unfortunate as she!

Lovely Moth remembered the marriages of the women who were now of the same age as herself. Everyone who had received a token from her lover before she became a bride—every single one of them—had a miserable life. All were beaten—some by their husbands, some by their mothers-in-law. A few were hounded into suicide. Others might just as well have been widows—their husbands completely ignored them. . . .

Anyhow, the root of Ai-ai's beating has already been planted, she mused bitterly. Why fight against this thing? She'll be whipped, no matter whom she marries!

But it would be too simple to take the easy way out. Lovely Moth's rioting mind wouldn't let her rest. She couldn't forget the day when Chang stared at her with terrible eyes, the way he hauled her by the hair to the bed, how he beat her fiercely and relentlessly so that she couldn't catch her breath. . . . It was murderous! Even after twenty years, the recollection still made her tremble! How could Ai-ai ever stand such agony?

The struggle raged on in Lovely Moth's breast. She had no appetite when they called her for lunch. In order not to worry her mother, she forced down a few mouthfuls of food.

A little later, Aunty Wu, who had become tired of waiting, called at the house.

The matchmaker urged her to visit the family of the proposed groom.

"It's getting late," deferred Lovely Moth. "We want to get home before dark."

With Chang and Aunty Wu, she set out on her return trip. When the old matchmaker began praising the one hundred and twenty per cent perfection of the civil clerk's nephew, Lovely Moth turned a deaf ear. She flew down the road with the grace and swiftness that earned her her nickname as a girl. All the way home, Aunty Wu was unable to close the gap of a good ten paces which Lovely Moth kept between them.

Upon entering the village, Chang was surrounded by a gang of boys. In answer to their pleas, he went to the threshing ground to teach them how to work the cloth dragon. Lovely Moth went directly home, trailed by the persistent matchmaker. It was then that Aunty

Wu met her rebuff and Ai-ai's shining eyes danced with joy.

Yen-yen felt that the moment had come. A significant look from her, and Ai-ai left the room. Yen-yen addressed herself to Lovely Moth.

"May I be a matchmaker for Ai-ai too?"

Lovely Moth thought this was a child's whimsy. "How can you be a matchmaker?" she smiled.

Yen-yen smiled back. "Why can't I?"

"Have you got a mouth like Aunty Wu?"

"Since she's such a good talker, why hasn't she talked you into agreeing with her?"

"I can't agree with her when she picks a boy who's not suitable."

"The point is, then, whether we can find someone suitable, not whether the matchmaker is a smooth talker! I can suggest a boy you're sure to approve of!"

"Let's hear it."

"I suggest Wan!"

"I knew you were going to say that! It's no use talking about him. You girls mustn't be so bold. There's too much gossip about you already."

"I could say like Aunty Wu—'Whether from the point of view of the boy or his family—there's nothing wrong with any of them!' But my words are truer than the empty chatter of that old muddle-head! Honestly now, don't you think I'm right?"

"You're not looking at the other side of it. How would that stop the gossip?"

"The ones making the idle talk are all old fogies. They gossip only because of Wan. If Ai-ai marries him, there won't be anything left for them to say!"

Yen-yen's got something there! thought Lovely Moth. Marrying Wan would stop the gossip all right. And I wouldn't have to worry about him beating her.

She looked at Yen-yen affectionately and gently stroked the girl's hair.

"Dear child," she smiled. "You make a fine matchmaker."

Sensing that Lovely Moth was wavering, Yen-yen asked her quickly, "Then you agree?"

The older woman looked thoughtful. "Don't be impatient," she said finally. "There's still Ai-ai's father. Wait till I've talked it over with him."

Satisfied, Yen-yen said good-bye to Lovely Moth and left to cross the courtyard towards Ai-ai's room. As she walked through the door, she nearly stumbled over her. Ai-ai had been listening at the window. With her finger to her lips, she led Yen-yen out of the compound.

"Then you heard everything!" said Yen-yen when they reached the street.

"Everything!" said Ai-ai. "I don't know how to thank you!"

"Don't thank me yet. There's another party I still have to convince! Wait for me in front of the co-op store and watch the lantern games. I have to try Wan's house now!" Yen-yen trotted briskly off to her next objective.

Again she did things the feminine way. She approached Wan's mother. In Chang Village, once the proposed bride's family had expressed its willingness, it was easy to get the boy's family to agree to the match. In a surprisingly short time, Yen-yen obtained the approval of Wan's mother.

She hurried to the co-op and dragged Ai-ai to a quiet spot where she reported the news of victory. "And if your mother can convince your father tonight," Yen-yen concluded breathlessly, "tomorrow you can go with Wan and register!"

Ai-ai thanked her a thousand times and happily

returned home. Yen-yen suddenly remembered her own troubles and the joy at her friend's good fortune drained from her heart.

In the security of the secluded place, she wept silently. Only after the streets were deserted did she go back to her house. Lying in bed, Yen-yen miserably wondered whether she should sacrifice herself by registering her marriage at the district office the next day, or refuse and offend her mother. All night she wrestled with the problem. At dawn she was still wide awake.

And what about Lovely Moth? After Yen-yen had departed, she mentally itemized everything she knew about Wan and his family—they were earning a living; they got along well with one another; Wan's parents had even dispositions, the boy was good-looking and respectable; he was the same age as Ai-ai. . . . She could think of nothing wrong with them.

Lovely Moth decided to give her full consent. "Ai-ai," she whispered to herself, "you see things very clearly! And the gossipers really are a bunch of old fogies!"

She opened her trunk and took out Ai-ai's Lohan coin. Lovely Moth pondered how to go about giving it back to her daughter. As she sat thoughtfully kneading the token in the palm of her hand, Ai-ai gaily burst into the room.

"What's that you've got, Ma?" asked the girl, spying the glittering object.

Holding it between her two fingers, Lovely Moth replied, "A Lohan coin!"

"Where did you get it?"

"I found it."

"Ma, it's mine!"

"And where did you get it?"

"I—I found it too!" laughed Ai-ai.

Lovely Moth looked long at her daughter's face. "Here. If it's yours, take it."

They smiled at each other as Ai-ai returned the Lohan to her pocket.

Before long, Chang came home and Ai-ai retired to her room. The carpenter and his wife began to discuss the question of their daughter's marriage. On the other side of the courtyard, Ai-ai couldn't hear what they were saying, although she crawled to the foot of her bed and glued her ear to the window. From the sound of their voices, she could only tell that they were arguing. Ai-ai slept very badly that night.

The next morning, she finished the household chores in record time and rushed over to see her young "matchmaker." She intended to ask Yen-yen to find out the results of the talk her parents had had the previous night. But from the scene which met her eye when she reached her friend's house, she knew she had better postpone her request.

Although this was the day Yen-yen was due to go to the district government to register her marriage, she was still in bed. Her mother sat by her side, pleading. Aunty Wu was also there.

"What's the matter with Yen-yen?" asked Ai-ai anxiously.

"She's trying to kill me with aggravation!" said Yen-yen's mother.

"I've given in," said Yen-yen. "Why do you still say I aggravate you?"

"Then why won't you get out of bed?" asked her mother. "Dear! Don't exasperate me. Get up and listen to Aunty Wu explain what you have to do at the district government. And you have to go to the village administration office first for your letter of introduction. It's getting late!"

"I'll die before I go to the village administration

office! That civil clerk'll only make me criticize myself again!"

"I'll go for you, if you like. Now don't you think you ought to get out of bed and listen to Aunty Wu tell you about the procedure?"

Yen-yen sat up angrily. "The whole business is the same old feudal routine! Yet you insist I pretend to be willing, and make a show of myself! Well, what is this fine procedure—let's hear it!"

"Don't be so stubborn, dear girl," said Aunty Wu silkily. "This is a happy event. You should be more cheerful."

"Hurry up and recite your phoney procedure! What happy event? You may be happy—I'm not!"

"All right, all right! When we get to the district government, I'll hand in the letter of introduction to Registrar Wang. He'll ask you how old you are. You tell him. Then he'll ask if you're willing. You'll say that you are. . . . "

"You call this being willing!" interrupted Yen-yen.

"Silly child! You only have to *say* that you're willing!" explained Aunty Wu. "If he asks you why, you answer, 'Because he's a good worker.' "

"Rot! I haven't even seen him. How do I know whether he's a good worker or not?"

"So much to say for a young girl!" scolded Yen-yen's mother. "You won't be content until you drive me to an early grave!"

"But I really *don't* know, Ma! Never mind. I'll say whatever you want. Aunty Wu, is there any more to this nonsense? Spit it out and be done with it!"

"No. That's the whole thing."

Yen-yen's mother and Aunty Wu went to the village administration office for the letter of introduction. Wan, who had come looking for Ai-ai, waited in the courtyard until the argument was over and the two older women had left. Now he entered and stood beside Ai-ai. They gazed mournfully at their friend.

"Yen-yen, I don't know how to comfort you . . . " said Ai-ai.

"My fate is sealed. There's nothing to talk about. But what about you? Has your father consented?"

"I haven't had the nerve to ask. This is a sad day for you. We'll talk about me some other time."

"No! I'm going to see your business through! I'm not going to let you end up like me. If you succeed, it'll be a lesson to my ma. You wait here while I go ask your mother. If your father consents, today we can go to the district government together!" Yen-yen was already dressed. She put on her shoes and flew out the door.

Wan and Ai-ai were alone.

"I don't think my father is against us," said the girl, "and I hear your parents are willing. What we have to worry about is getting the letter from the civil clerk."

"That's the way I look at it too. Anything he has a finger in must be done his way. I bet you'd get it easy enough if you agreed to marry his nephew!"

"There's no doubt about that! But what'll we do if he won't issue the letter?"

While they were still trying to think of a solution, Yen-yen returned and said that Ai-ai's father had consented to her marrying Wan! As to the letter, Yen-yen had an idea.

"Let's go to the civil clerk," she urged. "If he refuses to issue it, you can bring up the question of my letter. Ask him how can he give one to my mother, who only represents me, and not give one to you when you come in person? We'll see what he has to say to that!"

Wan nodded approvingly. "Right! If he still refuses we can go to register at the district government

without it. When they ask for our letter we'll tell them the whole story and show what a feudal fogey the civil clerk is!"

"But won't you be letting Yen-yen's business leak out?" asked Ai-ai.

"So much the better," put in Yen-yen. "If the story comes from you, my mother won't be able to blame me for it."

"Suppose the civil clerk wants a matchmaker?" said Wan.

"Tell him I'm the one!" replied Yen-yen. "Let's go to the administration office. As soon as my mother comes out, we'll go in!"

Ai-ai hesitated. "What if the civil clerk says you can't be a matchmaker because your reputation is no good?"

"I have an answer to that too," said Yen-yen.

Still busily planning, they walked to the building which housed the village administration office. On the way, they met Aunty Wu and Yen-yen's mother coming back.

"We don't need you," Aunty Wu said to Yen-yen. "We already have the letter."

"I want to ask what's in it," replied Yen-yen. "When we hand it over at the district government I don't want to say anything different."

The two older women smiled with gratification at the girl's apparent co-operativeness. "If you had acted this way from the beginning you would have saved me a trip," said her mother. "Ask your questions and hurry home. I want you to have a bite to eat before you leave."

As Yen-yen's mother and the matchmaker walked away, the three youths entered the office. The civil clerk recognized his visitors and looked at them with unconcealed annoyance. Ignoring Ai-ai and Wan, he spoke directly to Yen-yen.

"Go on home. I've already given the letter to your mother."

"I know it," replied Yen-yen. "I've come for one for these friends."

Askance, the clerk stared at Wan and Ai-ai. "For you two?"

"For us two!"

"You'd better reflect on your wrongs!"

"We have reflected. We're both willing."

"I'm sure of that!" sneered the clerk.

"Not only that, but my father and mother are willing too," said Ai-ai.

"So are mine," Wan chimed in.

"Who's your matchmaker?" asked the clerk.

"I am," said Yen-yen.

"You?"

"Why not?"

"With your reputation?"

"What's the matter with my reputation?" Yen-yen asked. "If there's anything wrong with me why did you just give my mother a letter introducing me to the district registrar?"

The clerk had no answer to that one and he took refuge in anger. "Beat it, the three of you!" he shouted. "You're all not respectable!"

Since the battle was obviously lost, Ai-ai let herself speak freely. "But if I married your nephew, that would make me respectable, wouldn't it?" she asked cuttingly.

Actually, the clerk had two different opinions of Ai-ai. Once, when he saw her holding hands with Wan, he said to himself, "Disgraceful! She's just the way Lovely Moth was as a girl!" On another occasion, while visiting his sister, he recommended Ai-ai as a suitable

bride for his sister's son. "What kind of a girl is she?" his sister had asked. "Fine," he had answered. "Just like Lovely Moth used to be!"

In the clerk's mind there was no inconsistency in these evaluations. When he said "fine," he meant that Ai-ai was very pretty and fine to look at. When he said "disgraceful," he was talking about her conduct, for he believed that any relationship between a boy and a girl before marriage was highly improper.

However, he did not attach the same weight to "conduct" as he did to "looks." "Looks" were inherited and there was nothing anybody could do about them. "Conduct," on the other hand, could be made to conform to the husband's idea of decency by means of a good beating after marriage. In this respect, the clerk completely shared the views of the matchmaker Aunty Wu.

To get back to our story—when Ai-ai made that sarcastic comment about marrying his nephew, the clerk became so furious that he could hardly catch his breath. Savagely, he closed the cover of his ink slab. "No matter what you say, I won't write you the letter!"

"We'll go register at the district government anyway!" threatened Ai-ai. "We'll let them decide!"

"Try it and see what happens! Don't you think they know your reputation too!"

The argument raged and they wrangled, neither side willing to give an inch. Finally, the angry youths left the office in disgust.

An hour later, after Yen-yen had had her bite to eat, they set out with Aunty Wu for the district government. It had been arranged that Yen-yen's future husband would meet her there. Disliking the matchmaker intensely, the young man and women deliberately walked at a brisk pace, making her pant behind them all the way in a futile effort to keep up.

When they reached their destination, Aunty Wu

was still far behind. They waited outside the door of the marriage registration office. There were five or six other people standing around—of both sexes and of various ages—but no one whom any of them recognized. Two older people probably were matchmakers. Then there were two youths—one about twenty, the other about fifteen. The youths from Chang Village guessed that the latter must be Yen-yen's groom, for Aunty Wu had described him as "over fifteen."

But they knew they were wrong as soon as the old lady, wheezing, at last arrived. "Why isn't that child here yet?" she muttered. A little boy came running out of the doorman's room. "Aunty," he cried to the matchmaker, "I've been waiting for you!" The childish treble of his voice was more highly pitched than Yen-yen's own. He was a head shorter than his intended, with plump red cheeks. His bright little eyes shone like a cat's and the backs of his small chubby hands were pitted with charming dimples.

What a cute child! thought Yen-yen. But he still should be drinking his mother's milk. Why does he want to get married?

"Let's go in," said Aunty Wu.

The small office was crowded with applicants coming to formalize their marriages, and Registrar Wang was soaked with perspiration. As each couple reached his desk, he asked the same questions and received the same answers. "Name?" So-and-so. "Age?" They told him. "Are you willing?" Willing. "Why?" Because he's a good worker. It was just as Aunty Wu had said. The questions were by rote and the answers seemed memorized. After the applying couple completed their recitation, Registrar Wang presented them with a red paper certificate to which they and their matchmaker affixed their finger-prints. That was all. Except for two cases—one where the false age was too obvious, the

other where the couple had been in trouble before—no application was refused.

Watching the procedure, the youths from Chang Village kept moving forward in their places on line. When their turn was reached, Yen-yen pushed Ai-ai in front of her.

"You go first!" she whispered.

Registrar Wang stretched out his hand for the letter of introduction. The little boy who had spoken to Aunty Wu, squeezed his way to the desk and thrust his paper at the registrar. The matchmaker hadn't introduced him and he assumed that Ai-ai, being the younger of the two girls, was the one he would marry. Aunty Wu was frantic.

"That's wrong, that's wrong!" she shrilled.

"What do you mean?" said the child, puzzled. "Doesn't each of us have to have a letter?"

Young Wan pushed up beside the desk. He pointed at Yen-yen. "Yours is that one!"

The whole room exploded with laughter.

"How is it that you don't know your own girl?" asked the registrar, handing the letter back to the little boy.

"Can I register with her?" said Wan, quickly moving next to Ai-ai. "We don't have any introduction form."

"Why don't you?"

"Our civil clerk wouldn't issue one," said Ai-ai. "He gave one to Yen-yen's mother, but when we went in person, he turned us down! He wants me to marry his nephew!"

"What village are you from?"

"Chang Village."

"What's your name?"

"Chang Ai-ai."

The registrar looked them over slowly. "And you must be Wan," he said to the boy.

"That's right."

"Who's the matchmaker?"

Yen-yen stepped forward. "I am."

"What's your name?"

"Ma Yen-yen."

"How can you be a matchmaker?"

"Why can't I?"

"We have a report from your village that says the reputation of both you girls is no good."

"What proof do you have?" chorused Wan and the girls.

"The report says you've been friendly together for a long time."

"What's wrong with that?" Wan demanded. "If I didn't know her before, maybe I'd try to marry the wrong girl here today too!"

A roar of mirth from the other applicants greeted this sally. The registrar hesitated.

"Since there is such a report, I'll have to investigate first," he said.

"Why shouldn't they marry?" pleaded Yen-yen. "What harm would it do anyone? They've never been married before and they're not in any trouble. There's no question about them both being willing. What is there to investigate?"

The registrar shook his head. "No. I must investigate. That's the way it'll have to be," he said with finality. He turned to the little boy. "Now let me see your letter." The child handed it to him and Aunty Wu presented Yen-yen's introduction.

"What's your name?" the registrar asked the little boy.

"Dan."

"What part of your teens are you in?"

But this was not the way Aunty Wu told him the age question would be asked! He was only twelve and became confused.

"Twenty-teen!"

"What do you mean—'twenty-teen'?"

The child said nothing.

"Are you willing to marry this girl?" the registrar asked after a pause.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she's a good worker."

The registrar examined Yen-yen's letter; then he looked at her.

"How old is the boy?"

"I don't know."

The matchmaker prodded her sharply. "Of course you know!"

"But I really don't!" protested Yen-yen. "You never told me!"

Not realizing that Yen-yen was acting deliberately, Aunty Wu berated her in an undertone. "How can you be so stupid!" hissed the old lady. "Suppose I didn't tell you—he said he was twenty, why couldn't you say the same?"

To her dismay, the child picked this time to show off his cleverness. "How could she know how old I am?" he piped. "We're from different villages and we never met before!"

"You made that very plain a minute ago!" snapped the registrar. "And since you haven't seen her until today—how do you know that she's a good worker? I refuse to register this marriage! Firstly, the boy is too young to know whether he wants to get married or not; secondly, since they don't even recognize each other, there certainly can't have been any freedom of choice. Go home, all of you!"

Sadly, Aunty Wu led her charges out of the office. The little boy headed for his village and the others took the road back to Chang Village.

On the way home, the matchmaker scolded Yen-yen for saying the wrong thing. Yen-yen complained that the old lady hadn't given her complete instructions. Ai-ai and Wan said that the registrar was a muddle-head, but Yen-yen insisted he had a rather clear mind.

Walking rapidly, the youths again put a good distance between themselves and Aunty Wu. Yen-yen stated that she would continue to do her best to help the other two, and the latter promised to see to it that young Chin would forget his differences with her. To use the language of the diplomats, they made a "Mutual Assistance Pact."

There were many in Chang Village besides the civil clerk who considered the girls "bad." When the news of what they had done at the district government reached the village, the elderly people said the girls were "wicked beyond words!" They meant this quite literally and dropped the reputation of Ai-ai and Yen-yen as a topic of conversation. Those who had criticized the girls in the past mainly because their keeping company with Wan and Chin made it difficult to match them with their own sons or nephews, were finally convinced that any such hope was fruitless. Gradually, they stopped chattering about the girls. Some youngsters in the village used to dutifully echo their parents' censure of Ai-ai and Yen-yen, although they secretly approved the girls' conduct. If their elders now had lost interest, they saw no reason to revive the discussion. The boys who had been competing for the affections of Ai-ai and Yen-yen were forced to realize that no one could replace Wan and Chin. What was the use of loose talk?

Moreover, the girls now had a stock question for the remaining busy-bodies. "What harm is there in us

marrying anyone we want?" they would demand. Nobody could think of an intelligent answer. For all of these reasons, there was gradually less gossip and the girls' reputations even improved!

But because of three people, the youths still could not get married: Yen-yen's mother, who wouldn't give her consent, no matter how her daughter pleaded; the civil clerk, who flatly refused to issue the letters; and Registrar Wang, who talked but took no action. Wan and Ai-ai went to see him several times, and each time he said, "I haven't finished my investigation...."

Those who weren't opposed to the marriages did nothing to help. When the youths wanted to appeal to the higher authorities in the county government, they couldn't get permission from their parents to make the long trip to the city where its offices were located. And so the situation dragged on, with the civil clerk and the registrar heartily cursed by the lovers every day.

After two months of steady cursing, there still was no change. Then, one evening during the spring planting season, young Wan stopped at the village co-operative store. The manager grinned at him.

"How are you getting on with your marriage?"

"The district government is still checking!"

"When do you suppose the investigation will be completed?"

"In ten or twenty years!"

"You certainly take the long view! But you won't have to wait that long now—a marriage law has just come into effect. The way I understand it, you've been legally right all along!"

Wan thought the man was teasing him, and he only snorted. But the manager was serious. "It's true!" he insisted. "Take a look at this newspaper." He helped Wan read the appropriate part of the statute.

"Young Wan stumbled on the right method,"

nodded one of the other customers. "Go and register again tomorrow," he said to the boy. "It's completely legal!"

Within fifteen minutes, Ai-ai, Yen-yen, Wan and Chin, in accordance with their "Mutual Assistance Pact," were assembled at Ai-ai's house for a conference to discuss the latest development. Yen-yen suggested that Wan and Ai-ai register first.

"Once you've gotten your marriage certificate, my mother'll be easier to handle," she said. "Although you say I don't need her consent now, still I'd like it better if I could convince her."

They all agreed that that would be the preferable way. After the meeting adjourned, Ai-ai and Wan parted. Each sat up half the night planning how to cope with any questions that Registrar Wang might raise.

To their surprise and relief, when they arrived at the district government the next morning, it turned out that their preparations were unnecessary. The registrar issued the marriage certificate without a word!

The following day, a communication from the district government was received in the village administration office. It stated that the registration by Wan and Ai-ai was a model application of the new marriage law and requested that the district government be informed when the celebration would be held. Two cadres from the district wished to join the festivities.

An official designation of the match as "model" put matters in a different light. Except for a few die-hards, everybody in Chang Village now approved the marriage. The village youths, who had been sympathetic from the beginning, all pitched in to prepare for the festivities. A few days later, the decorating was completed.

The morning of the wedding ceremony, the two cadres arrived from the district government. They were Registrar Wang and the secretary of the Com-

munist Party district committee. Most of the village cadres also attended. The civil clerk had decided not to come, but the district representatives said that every other one of the village cadres could stay home if they chose, but nothing would excuse *his* absence. He came.

Because the marriage had been honoured as "model," the turnout was unusually large. A great crowd packed the modest compound where Wan lived with his parents. The guests' cheerful clamour stilled as the bride and groom took their places on a raised platform. Then a youngster, who had learned the new fashion somewhere, began ribbing the newly-weds about their love affair.

Ai-ai stood up. "Do you want to know how I got my 'bad reputation' and whom I blame for that?" she asked.

"Yes!" shouted the crowd.

"I blame everyone who tried to prevent us from getting married—that's who! If we had married a year ago, wouldn't my reputation have been restored a year ago? We used to talk a lot about 'freedom of choice in marriage'; but actually who did the choosing in our village? There's not one of you here whose parents didn't do the deciding for you!"

The villagers knew this was true, though they were embarrassed to hear it discussed openly before the district government cadres. Ai-ai continued:

"When Yen-yen and I wanted to make up our own minds, the civil clerk told us to criticize our wrongs. Well, we did. What was wrong with us was that we wanted to choose our own husbands! Frankly, because of this business, I've been cursing the civil clerk for the past two months, and I want to take this chance to apologize to him."

Amused, the guests wanted to know what words Ai-ai used in her profanity. She said that now that she

and Wan were married, she wanted to forget the past. They insisted. Ai-ai stood firm. Young Wan jumped to his feet.

"Let me speak!" he yelled with a grin. "I did some cursing too! Mr. Clerk, please don't be angry. I said to myself: 'I'm willing. She's willing. You're the only one who's not willing! What harm will it do you if we get married? Old pig-head! Dead brain! Nephew lover! You wouldn't tell her to criticize herself if she married your nephew!'"

The crowd looked at the civil clerk and laughed. Silent, he hung his head.

"Do you have any comments for Registrar Wang?" the Party district secretary asked Wan.

"Registrar Wang really is a good man," replied the boy, "but he can't tell the difference between true and false. He hears people say they're willing but he doesn't care whether they say it like they mean it. Some of them were so plainly telling falsehoods that even I knew it—but he gave them marriage certificates! And if a person is truly willing, why does he have to ask for a reason? They only give him the memorized answer—'Because he's a good worker.' What peasant isn't a good worker? What kind of a reason is that? Then it was our turn—and we were *really* willing. But he said a report from our village said that we had been friendly for a long time; that he would have to investigate. Doesn't the fact that we had been going together for a long time *prove* that we were willing? What was there to investigate?"

Young Wan chuckled. "I must admit we cursed you too, Registrar Wang. But don't hold it against us. From the day you issued us our marriage certificate, we haven't said a bad word against you!"

"You were quite right to curse," said the Party secretary, "and I guarantee that no one will hold any-

thing against either of you. Those who said your reputations were no good are still a little feudal in their thinking. They must gradually correct themselves. By refusing to issue your application in order to force Ai-ai to marry his nephew, the civil clerk was interfering with your right of freedom in marriage. Now that the Marriage Law of the Central People's Government has been proclaimed, any one guilty of that kind of conduct in the future will be tried before the court. Registrar Wang's endless delay in issuing your marriage certificate was bureaucratic and showed that he was unwilling to think things out. The past few days he's been reviewing his acts and criticizing himself. The entire Communist Party has pledged itself to effectuate the Marriage Law. We in the district committee are studying how to do this in the best possible way, and I've come here specifically to hear your ideas on the subject."

The Party secretary addressed himself to the assembled guests. "Comrades, don't you think these young man and woman were right in cursing? Think of how many marriages our village and district administrations handled wrongly these few years, how many people still must be cursing us daily! Unless we correct this situation, not only will we be disciplined by the Party, but the people are liable to curse us to death!"

After the wedding ceremony, the peasants all said that this kind of marriage was very good and that the newly-weds were sure to get along fine. Even the old folks who used to criticize Ai-ai and Yen-yen approved. This meant an end to beatings like the one Chang the carpenter gave Lovely Moth, they said.

That evening, Yen-yen's mother saw the light. Smiling, she suggested that the next day the girl should go with young Chin to the district government and register.

June 5, 1950

Yin Ching-chun

by HAN FENG

Han Feng was born in Yihsien County, Hopei Province, in 1919. For a time, he attended a rural normal school. But early in 1937, before Japan's attack on China, he was expelled from the school for being friends with some Communists. After the outbreak of the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression, he became a medical orderly in the Kuomintang army. In 1938, he fled to the Liberated Areas where he joined a theatrical troupe. The next year, he went to southeastern Shansi and worked as a propagandist there. He began to write in 1942. He has since produced several short stories and is now working on "Notes of a Hero."

I

Machine-gunner Yin Ching-chun of the People's Liberation Army sat straight and erect in a knoll of dry trees. Beyond the bamboos, beyond the dark-green leaves of the trees, he could see the sunlight-flooded fields. Unconsciously his hand stroked the barrel of his machine-gun, warmed by the sun. Blue rays shimmered along the gleaming metal. Lush star-shaped fruit, fallen to the ground, gave off a fragrance reminiscent of the sweet white apricots of the north in early summer. Here in the south it was almost winter, but a warm pleasant breeze still caressed him. Machine-gunner Yin was completely oblivious of the beauties of his surroundings. Like the other fighters in whose midst he stood, he was listening attentively to the words of the political commissar.

The face of Comrade Ma was flushed. He waved

his hands as he cried, "Comrades! The bandits of Pai Chung-hsi[1] have been forced from the north by our brother armies. There is only one road left open to them—to flee across the sea. They have mustered their entire force of over one hundred thousand men into battle formation and are advancing in our direction. They plan to capture Lienchiang, drive down Luichow Peninsula to its tip, and from there go by boats to Hainan Island. Our job is to cut them off and destroy them.

"Comrades! This task has been given to us by the Party and Chairman Mao. We shall have to cross mountains and rivers; we must press forward tirelessly to join battle. This will be the decisive battle on China's mainland. If we fight well, our country and our people will be rid of war much sooner and will be able to go on to the building of a peaceful prosperity. We must clearly understand that all of our bitter struggles in the past were for the sake of this. We who are Party members must display a strong bold heroism. The whole nation is watching us today, watching to see whether we can fulfil our duty. And we say: We will fulfil it one hundred percent! For the sake of our Party, our country, our people, we definitely will wipe out the evil plague for good!

"Speaking for ourselves as individuals, we have earned excellent reputations in past battles. Now we shall fight for more glory, fight to the end!"

The large sweaty hands of the fighters pounded together in applause, like a sudden burst of rain beating on the grassy plain. Even the bamboo leaves rustled and trembled. The men had crossed five mountain ranges in the past two months. Scaling lofty crags, walking through malarial mists, they had come all the

1 Warlord of Kwangsi Province and a leading henchman of Chiang Kai-shek.

way to the South China Sea. The skin on their faces was cracked by the torrid sun and the salt-bearing winds from the ocean. Now they were again stirred by a new task.

"Are we afraid of hardships?" shouted the commissar in a high voice. "No! Because we are an army led by the Communist Party, there are no difficulties or obstacles which we cannot overcome. We are loyal to the Party, to the people, to our country—and this loyalty gives us limitless strength!"

Again there was a storm of applause, then everyone rose. Machine-gunner Yin lifted his weapon with his powerful hand and left with the others.

That afternoon along the grassy banks of a pool outside the village, all of the Party members divided into small groups to discuss the commissar's report. The last rosy rays of the sun, which had already sunk below the western horizon, tinted the mountain tops.

When the Party meeting was about to start, Yin heard the sound of the whistle. Rushing out, he demanded, "Where do we assemble?"

"It's a meeting of the Party members. It's not an assembly call," the whistle blower replied.

II

Yin was a crack machine-gunner in the company. Only twenty-one, he already was big and solid. He came from the great plain of eastern Honan Province. In 1938, when Chiang Kai-shek destroyed the dykes and let the Yellow River inundate thousands of square miles, the few possessions of Yin's little home were swept away in the swirling muddy water. Yin's father set out to try to find some means of supporting his family. He was never heard from again. Yin and his mother

became refugees. She died of hunger along the road. Yin drifted from place to place. The next few years he begged for food, worked for a while as a cowherd, then became a boatman in the turbulent Yellow River. He joined the P.L.A. in the winter of 1947 during the attack against the armed counter-revolutionaries in Central China. By the battle of Huai Hai,[1] Yin had become an excellent soldier.

He blamed himself bitterly every time he thought of that glorious, famous campaign. He had applied to join the Party and had asked that his merit be appraised by how he acquitted himself in battle. He was a machine-gun ammunition carrier then. During attacks, he would carry boxes of ammunition in addition to the ten mortar shells and the two hand-grenades stuck in his belt. When an order to charge had been given, he followed the machine-gunner into enemy territory. The gunner was felled on open ground. Yin froze for a moment, then grabbed the machine-gun, clamped on a box of ammunition belts, and ran forward, firing, to clear a path for the advancing infantry. His bullets exhausted, he joined the charge, while giving cover with his hand-grenades.

After the fighting was over, Yin was commended for his bravery.

Because he liked to smoke, he took a fine pipe from a prisoner and put it in his knapsack. He really loved that pipe, but he mentioned it to no one.

The next day, his platoon leader invited him out for a chat. As they strolled through a grove of withered date trees outside the village, the platoon leader came to the point.

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1 This campaign took place on the plains of East China in winter, 1948-49. As a result 600,000 Kuomintang soldiers were put out of action.

"You do very well in the fighting. Everyone praises you. But that pipe of yours. . . . Of course it's a small thing, but we have our battlefield discipline. While the pipe itself doesn't mean anything, discipline can't be slighted."

Yin's application to become a Communist was held in abeyance.

Then they crossed the Yangtse and chased an enemy army to the sea and destroyed it completely. They had fought on the tidal mud flats, the salty sea-water lapping at their ankles. The soft ooze sucked off their shoes and many of them went barefoot while fighting the enemy.

Weathering the storm for long periods on the battlefield, Yin contracted a kind of fever. Now his head began to ache dully, his body trembled. . . .

Another attack of the fever.

Near dark, the weather was cooler. From the sea, one hundred *li*[1] away, wafted a soft wind which could almost be grasped by hand. The sweet fragrance of the star-shaped fruit mingled with the odour of the muddy rice paddies and the sun-dried rice stalks. In the room, Yin lay quietly. His forehead was already hot; his breath was harsh and short. Dizzy, he fell asleep.

Later he was awakened by a cool hand, damp with perspiration, being removed from his forehead. The hand undid a button of his tunic and pressed itself against his chest.

"He's sick. What shall we do?" said a voice, then went on, musingly, "the squad will be short of another experienced man. There are so many new comrades. . . ."

Hazily, Yin heard the voice calling him.

"Yin, are you sick?"

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1 See footnote on page 1.

"No." Yin forced open his eyes to see Squad Leader Tao beside his bed. Tao's cool hand against his burning body was comforting.

"You're very feverish."

"I felt cold before and I feel hot now. It's not serious. Will we hold a squad meeting tonight?"

"We will."

Tao refastened the button and then left. Tao's genuine concern for him moved Yin deeply!

That night, the whole squad gathered around a feebly flickering oil lamp. Yin had prepared his statement well in advance, and he spilled it out, practically all in one breath.

"Report! This is going to be the last battle on the mainland. I'll earn a citation; I'll earn the right to join the Party. Finished!"

It was very late when the meeting finally ended. Walking out of the room into the courtyard, Yin felt lighter. Cheerfully, he followed a narrow path along the bank of a pool which reflected the star-studded sky. There was a cool smell of river mud in the air. He could see a pale red glow in the window of a lone house at the end of the village. Yin walked to the house, pushed open the door and entered. For a long time, scarcely breathing, he stood beside Cultural Worker Li, writing in the light of the lamp on the table. Rather shyly, he requested Li to help him draw up an application.

Yin's formality and accents were those of a child. Although strong and tall, he had the feeling that everyone was much bigger than he. Watching the movement of the cultural worker's pen, he dictated very slowly, so that Li would not miss a single word.

"I guarantee that in this campaign I definitely will respond to the Party's call. I'll not only fight well; I'll be a model observer of discipline. Let the Party test me again this time!"

Still Yin wasn't satisfied. He dictated the statement again. Then he gazed at the ceiling and pondered: What else should I say? He wished it were possible to pluck out his heart and let it speak for him. The light shone on his anxious face. Time was fleeting. He had taken so many small tortuous side paths. Now he wanted to make a fresh start. Many heavy matters seemed to be crushing him, hindering him from getting on the "Party road."

Yin swallowed hard. "From today on," he said, "with my whole heart and mind, I'll give my all to perform the duties which the Party assigns me."

Beneath his name, he impressed his finger-print. He rose, folded the paper and departed. Outside, all was still. The reflection of the stars danced on the breeze-ruffled surface of the pool. Yin looked up at the sky. The three stars of Orion's belt were shining directly overhead. Yin stopped; he felt the statement in his pocket. I'll give it to the Party secretary the first thing in the morning, he thought.

III

West of Maoming County in Kwangtung Province are endless miles of wild mountains. The P.L.A. fighters constantly had difficulty in finding a road through the thickly wooded forests. For that region, not one black line was shown on their small-scale maps. They continued their steady climbing all through the night over mountains that became increasingly high. It was obvious that Yin's illness was getting worse.

Tao, the squad leader, was worried about him. "Take care of yourself, comrade," urged Tao. "Don't ruin your health. Drop out."

Yin refused. "I can keep up. Let's go." His only fear was that others would think he was sick.

Suffering, Yin tottered along the little path. The earth and sky seemed to be revolving, but he hung tenaciously to the rear of the marchers. His ammunition carrier Chao, a newly liberated fighter, walked with him. Chao was twenty years old. He came from Shantung Province. I shouldn't be so silent, Yin thought. I've got work to do. He took a grip on himself and drew a deep breath.

"Chao, are you afraid of fighting?"

"I've never been in battle. . . ."

"Don't be afraid. After you've been through it once, you'll know what to do."

"Will you be able to fight when you're so sick?"

"It's hardly any sickness. It'll pass soon. I'll be cured the minute the battle starts." Yin fought for breath and continued, "The sound of rifles used to scare me. I'd shiver when I heard one, and my heart would beat fast. Then we held a grievance-telling meeting. We got to the roots of our past miseries. And those roots were Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang reactionaries. They sat on us so hard we couldn't turn around! It was because of them that we suffered. Strange, as soon as we thought of our sufferings we became brave. The tougher the enemy, the fiercer our hatred became. We wanted to revenge our fathers and mothers, to revenge the poor people. . . . Our troubles now are only for a little while. After they've passed there'll be prosperity. When did hardships ever kill anyone? But our prosperity will be for all future generations. . . ."

Many mountains were left behind in the east as they talked. The sun, hanging in the western sky, roasted their faces. Yin's face was bathed in perspiration. His illness already was abating.

The noise of artillery fire was closer that day, and the sound of heavy machine-guns could be heard.

The troops entered a village and crowded into an extremely dirty courtyard. Sitting on their knapsacks, they waited. A field kitchen was set up on one side. Sharp chops of the vegetable cleaver blended with the chatter of a distant machine-gun. Flames seemed to envelop the suspended cauldron while the water bubbled and overflowed. When the slightly built political commissar pushed his way through the crowd, the men greeted him with applause. He brought his hand to the brim of his cap in a salute, and the fervour of the applause increased.

The political commissar waved a tightly clenched fist. "We're going to cork up the neck of the Luichow Peninsula and wipe out all of the enemy who are trying to flee. We shall bring to a victorious conclusion the final battle on the mainland. . . ."

The atmosphere was charged with tension. Yin fished through his pockets for his statement. Stepping over his machine-gun, he grabbed the Party secretary with his large paw.

"Secretary, I'm giving you this!"

Taking his hand, the Party secretary scrutinized his face. "Comrade, you'd better stay in the rear with the quarter-master."

Yin was frantic. For a moment he couldn't speak. His lips were trembling.

"But I've made up my mind. . . ."

"I know. But you're not feeling well."

"No! I have taken medicine. I'm better already. There's nothing wrong with me."

The Party secretary looked at him closely. He accepted the stubborn machine-gunner's "Statement of Determination." Then he nodded in assent. In time of battle there was so much heroic conduct which could

move one to tears. There was nothing he could say. The Party would not forget the deeds of a single comrade.

After they had eaten, the men gathered at the place of assembly. Standing behind Yin, Chao was anxious.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine! I'm better now."

Touched, Chao looked at him. Yin's face was yellow and bloodless. The new fighter couldn't understand this mystery. Yin had had been sick for quite a few days, but he still was as unyielding as an iron rod. Just now he had only drunk one bowl of rice gruel; how could he possibly go on? This big fellow sooner or later is going to collapse on the road, thought Chao.

Yin turned his head and spoke to him, "Is the ammunition all in order? The belts should be loaded and oiled."

"Everything is ready."

"When the fighting starts, stay close behind me. Don't lose me, eh?"

"Don't worry. Wherever you go, I'll be there."

In the short time they knew one another, they had already become very good friends. Friendships are formed most quickly in battle campaigns, and they are the closest kind. Yin had to teach his battle comrade how to fight, how to be firm.

"There's nothing frightening about the fighting," said Yin. "Just remember: the bolder we are, the softer the enemy becomes. If we move slowly when we charge, the enemy has time to aim. If we rush and fire at the same time, the enemy won't have a chance to return a shot. You stick close to me. When I tell you to drop, you drop. When I tell you to charge, you charge. This is our chance to earn honours serving the people!"

It was deep night and a half-moon shone on the

bare mountain ridges. The attacking forces of the P.L.A. set out across the heights and valleys towards the village of Paohsu.

IV

Fleeing to the northwest, the enemy had first destroyed the bridge across the narrow but swiftly flowing Peilo River. Our pursuing troops were halted on its eastern bank. On both sides of the river were high mountains. Ignoring the protests of his comrades, Yin jumped into the stream with three other men. They swam across the turbulent waters to the opposite bank. Beneath the cliff, they found a large log raft and dragged it into the river, crossways, athwart the flow of the current.

Yin was a fine swimmer, but standing shoulder deep in mid-stream, he had a hard time to keep from being washed away by the rushing blue waters. Swimming desperately with one hand, with the other he held the raft in place between the river banks, while another man laid planks across the top of the logs to make a pontoon bridge. River water in winter is hardly a good thing for a sick man. Yin was unable to keep his feet. White capped waves buffeted him till he floated on the surface of the water. Gritting his teeth, he forced his feet down and held the raft in place again. The next time he was flung up, Yin's face was ghastly. With two powerful strokes, he swam to the shallows on the opposite side and tied the raft to a remaining support of the destroyed bridge. Then he swam back and climbed ashore. He staggered. Another attack of fever. . . .

Squad Leader Tao hurried over to him. "Let me take your machine-gun," he said worriedly. "You follow slowly in the rear."

He didn't have the heart to scold Yin for going into the water. That was to his credit; it wasn't something wrong.

"I only feel a little tired, but I'll be all right in a minute."

Chao loaded all of Yin's equipment on to his own back. Yin's whole body was consumed with fever. His eyes were red. Walking was going to be difficult. He could barely stand.

"Rest for a while, then go," Chao urged him.

"I don't have to. It is always the case: if you don't brace yourself up, you won't even be able to move half a step. It'll be just as bad whether I go or not." Yin was determined to keep up with the march. What if the squad leader should learn of his sickness and ask him to stay behind? When he thought of this, Yin's weakness left him.

His body burned like fire, his head ached. Yin didn't want to talk to anyone, only to keep mechanically moving his legs. The barren mountains and the glaring sun swayed dizzily before his eyes. His lips were parched and cracked. If he ever went down, he would never be able to get up again. Dazed, it seemed to Yin that he wasn't walking but that he was in the water, his body going where the waves took it. . . .

The gruelling effects of his illness plus marching without respite sometimes made his thoughts conflict with one another. It was odd, he mused. Every time he thought of himself and pitied himself, he immediately felt terribly weak, as if he were going to collapse. Yet the moment he thought of the cause of the revolution and the Party, he became strong and his legs gained added vigour.

Towards evening, the wind swept across the western ridges. Blowing against his hot body, the coolness

relieved Yin as though releasing him from a flaming cage. The redness receded from his bloodshot eyes.

"Chao," he cried, "I'm well!"

Chao placed his hand against Yin's forehead. It was cool and moist. Yin's fever was gone.

"Hey! You've come through it. I thought you weren't even going to be able to get up that last big mountain."

Yin laughed. "You don't know the half of it. I couldn't breathe when we were climbing. I didn't have an ounce of strength. Then I thought: Being a people's soldier is no easy matter. We have to do things other people can't. As we push on ahead, the people in the rear can have a good life. My heart was singing softly: . . . *Communist Party of China, you are the kernel, you are the direction. We will go along with you forever.* . . . That was how I got over that mountain, that was the source of my strength. As soon as you realize that your hardships are glorious, they don't seem difficult any more. How far have we come?"

"Over eighty *li*."

V

The night was cold, and the wind howled across the wide rolling plain. Rocked by the gale, the pines hissed like billows in a great sea. On the plain, tiny frost particles glistened in the moonlight. Huddled together in a patch of waist-high grass and scrub pines on a mountain top, a group of soldiers were sleeping soundly. Before them paced a sentry, a coverlet thrown across his shoulders. He held his hands in his sleeves as he peered across the expanse of open ground. From far-away North China an icy wind came raiding against the sleeping men.

They were a platoon of the army which, in pursuit of the enemy, yesterday had marched one hundred *li* to a town in Luchuan County in Kwangsi Province. Now the platoon had been sent ahead to scout. Yin slept next to his squad leader. The men made him lie in the middle to protect him from the cold. Even so, he awakened several times, shivering.

The forced march of the previous day had cut off the enemy's escape route down the peninsula. Stopped at Lienchiang, the enemy had fled northwest to mass on the south bank of the Hsichiang River. They were the 175th Division, the main force of Pai Chung-hsi.

The platoon awakened at dawn. Gazing into the distance from the mountain top, they could see little specks of flame, followed a few seconds later by the sound of firing. The situation had changed; the enemy was moving up from behind them. Yin walked over to his sleeping ammunition carrier and prodded him lightly with his foot.

"Get ready. The enemy's come knocking at our door."

As the day brightened they could plainly see the enemy coming towards them in groups over the mountain ridges. The platoon leader immediately ordered the men forward to meet them. Spreading out, the P.L.A. fighters moved quickly through the tall brown grass to a grove of small pines. The enemy was only three *li* away.

Soon the firing was brisk. As far as the eye could see, on every height, in every grove, were P.L.A. and enemy machine-guns. A large body of enemy men and horses were crowded together beside a small stream. They started to flee towards the mountains on the north.

A messenger brought an order from the regimental commander: "Stop them."

Yin picked up his machine-gun. With a "Follow

me!" he ran with the rest of the platoon. They had to drive back the enemy's flank guard before they could cut straight into the main body. They had pursued as far as the foot of a high ridge, when suddenly from above bullets came streaming down like swarms of locusts. On the top of the ridge, the enemy had set up two heavy machine-guns, as well as several light machine-guns and automatic rifles.

The platoon decided to move straight up the face of the mountain. Yin ran forward a distance with the others, placed his machine-gun in the fork of a tree and began firing. Enemy bullets cut off the tree's leaves and branches. Cradling the gun in his arms, he leapt from beside the tree to behind a boulder, and from there into a grove of trees. Chao, who had followed close behind, handed him a fresh box of loaded ammunition belts. The platoon took cover in a depression halfway up the mountain. They were very close to the enemy now. They rested a few minutes to catch their breaths. A hail of enemy bullets whizzed low overhead. All around, the grass was flattened by the flying projectiles. The enemy turned on them his entire fire power.

A cold chill ran down Yin's spine and he began to shiver.

Squad Leader Tao was dumbfounded. He stared at Yin. The machine-gunner's face was like yellow wax. The gun trembled violently in his hands, but his lips were locked tight.

No one had thought that the fever would come in the middle of a charge. The situation was bad. The platoon leader had been killed; one squad had been stopped. They were left with only a few rifles and three machine-guns.

Tao was worried. Attacking was a difficult job for the fighters. His legs were covered with scars. During

the attack on the ancient capital of Loyang he had been hit in the left leg; in the Huai Hai campaign his right leg had been wounded. To make matters worse, during their rush a few minutes ago, bamboo stubble had pierced through the sole of one of his cloth shoes into his foot.

He wasn't concerned with these personal problems. What did bother him was the machine-gunner.

"Is it serious?" Tao asked Yin grimly. "Suppose you stay here. Don't go up any further."

Chao reached out his hand to take the weapon, but the machine-gunner held him off. Yin spoke to the squad leader in a voice which shook.

"Serious or not, I'm going up!"

"Give me the gun," Chao urged.

Yin held the weapon tight in his trembling hands. "No. If I can go up, I can carry the gun. Give me some ammunition!"

They started their charge; but the moment they went into action, the enemy deluged them with a rain of flying lead. The wrath of the machine-gunner was aroused. His eyes shone with a vengeful gleam. He was going to come through this test, he was going to earn another qualification to become a glorious Party member, he was going to be victorious on every score: he would conquer his illness; fighting stubbornly he would wipe out the enemy to the last man!

Through the waist-deep grass, they moved quickly towards the enemy. They could see the swarthy visage of the man who was sweeping a wide arc with a heavy machine-gun. Two other men were feeding the ammunition belts. Suddenly the whole squad stood up and fired a fierce volley at the emplacement. The heavy machine-gun was struck; the gunner pitched forward headlong. They rushed and took the position. There

were two bodies beside the heavy machine-gun. The remaining enemy scattered and fled.

"Lay down your arms! Lay down your arms and be well treated!" shouted Chao. He was very happy.

The P.L.A. pressed forward in pursuit. The plain was like a hunting field. Everywhere there was chase, everywhere there was shouting, everywhere was the sound of firing.

The fighting was over, and the prisoners were all rounded up. Holding the machine-gun, Chao came out of a narrow path in a paddy field, carrying Yin on his back. Chao was almost in tears.

"As soon as it was over, he fell down in the rice paddy," he gasped.

The men became silent. They lowered Yin to the ground. The purpose in his heart had kept the machine-gunner going. All the hardship, endurance, struggle, had not been for his own sake, but for the great and splendid ideal which was within him. Because he was completely willing to endure the painful torture, he had said time and again: "I'm already better!" He had never revealed his suffering to the others, because they all were the same as he.

Yin's face was deadly pale, but there was a faint smile around the corners of his mouth.

VI

After the battle, the men began a forced march which was to last five days and five nights. Because Pai Chung-hsi's army, gathered south of the Hsichiang River, was fleeing towards Chinchou, our forces had to head them off. On both sides of the Koulou Range, a long-distance race started, of over five hundred *li*.

Tensely, the political commissar examined the map.

They had to cover one hundred *li* every day, without a stop. This would be a severe test for the men.

"To fulfil this task," he told the cadres, "our men will require a high degree of new heroism. I call on our warriors to be hard and glorious to the finish. Hear me, Communists! To fulfil this task, you must override all difficulties. Zealously stand at the fore and lead the forces by the model of your conduct."

Again his eyes returned to the map. The dense black whorls representing the mountains and the line upon line of rivers made him frown. There were many formidable obstacles in the path of the march route. Now, the time had come to overcome them all, to persevere through every hardship. "We must make this clear to the men," he said repeatedly.

Five hundred *li*. That meant crossing five hundred *li* of high bluish mountains in the Koulou Range and swift turbulent rivers. It was impossible to calculate how much determined will the men would need to scale these barriers. For the victory of the people, what price would the fighters have to pay for every inch of ground!

The regimental commander issued his orders: "Now we are going to advance, regardless of everything. It will not be a case of a short rest every fifteen *li*, a long rest every thirty, and make camp after sixty. We'll walk, and walk, and keep walking. This is an order!"

Yin had recovered quickly after he had fainted on the battlefield, but during the first day of the forced march Chao developed blisters as big as dates on both his feet. Each step was agony. He simply couldn't walk. Yin relieved Chao of all his equipment and supported the boy with one hand under his armpit. They fell behind the rest of the marchers. For a long time Chao kept his head down and did not speak.

"Are you crying?" Yin asked him.

"N—No. . . ."

"Don't cry! Why should we cry? You've always hated the Kuomintang reactionaries. They oppressed and insulted me plenty. They didn't let us poor people live. And they grabbed us for their dirty army, to give our lives for them. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't have had to suffer anything."

They didn't make camp until it was very late at night. Chao lay down the moment he entered. Yin brought a basin of warm water from the kitchen, and after removing Chao's shoes, gently washed his feet. Raw red flesh showed where the clumps of mud had been. Then Yin bandaged the feet lightly, carried Chao to his bed and covered him.

By now, everyone was asleep. Yin began to eat his supper. The food was cold. He couldn't make himself swallow a morsel. He tried to stand, but the moment he put weight on his feet he had to sit down again. His eyes blacked out. He couldn't even see the light of the oil lamp. His head and eyes ached terribly. He stared at the place where the lamp stood. After a while, the flame gradually returned to view. It got bigger and brighter. Again he tried to stand. Both feet pained as if he were standing on needles, but he steeled himself to walk step by step to his bed.

Chao turned over and looked at him. "You're still not sleeping?"

"I'm all right. You go back to sleep. I'm only worried about how you're going to walk tomorrow."

Grateful for his anxious words, Chao replied, "I'm all right. On the road today I thought: We're not marching with our feet, we're marching with our hearts! There had to be determination in every step, or I couldn't have gone on."

Yin lay down. "And we'll keep going on! After the whole country is liberated and victory is won, our

feet will be a credit to us. We ought to give them citations, special citations!"

VII

The path was like an interminable ribbon, now climbing to the peaks, now dropping into the dark narrow valleys. The marchers only stopped one hour for their meals and rest. By the time the cook began scrubbing the cauldron, the vanguard column was already again in motion.

It was winter, and at night there were frequent falls of fine misty hail which soaked through the men's thin clothing. Flowery frost patterns appeared on the blue barrels of the rifles. Water-filled rice paddies became irregular sheets of glass; treading the narrow raised walks, the men seemed to be skirting along mirror rims.

Yin's body was soaked with perspiration; his clothes, damp and chilly, clung to his spine. Sleep was overpowering him, heavily pressing his eyelids closed. He was no longer walking, but rather waving forward. The glaring white frost seemed to his eyes a stretch of sea, covering everything, overflowing. In his dream, the enemy was fleeing through the water. Frantic, he tried to pursue, but he couldn't move his legs. Then the sea engulfed him with a rush, and he was tossed and buffeted. . . . Yin's legs suddenly went soft. He was about to fall when he was shocked into wakefulness. In a cold sweat, he found that he had walked into a small water-filled ditch.

Immediately, Yin's eyes again began to close. While his body swayed from side to side, his mind was indolently riding on a cloud. His burning feet were in

the cool lovely water. Nothing could be more comfortable. . . . Happily, he kicked and played. . . .

"Keep moving! You've fallen asleep!"

Someone pushed him hard from behind and he woke with a start. He had fallen almost twenty feet behind the marcher in front of him. Slapping his forehead sharply a couple of times, Yin made great strides until he caught up. For a long stretch he fought with himself, keeping his eyes open by force of staring.

The road crossed a small bridge, then plunged into a deep forest and up the mountain. It was late at night and bitterly cold. The moonlight on the leaves glistened like moisture. Everything was cold, damp. The men felt immersed in ice water. There was no warmth anywhere. Slowly, silently, they clambered up the great mountain. When the vanguard halted for a moment, the men bringing up the rear at once fell flat and began to snore on the damp ground.

Yin was really exhausted. He could have lain down anywhere and slept for three days straight. Since the forced march started, he had only had a total of three hours' sleep, during the first day. Thereafter, he hadn't closed his eyes. He curled up on the side of the road and fell into a deep slumber, though the moist ground chilled half of his body. From the head of the march column came the call, "Let's go—oh!"

Yin leapt to his feet, but his legs, stiffer and more painful than before he had lain down, immediately collapsed beneath him. Many men were still sleeping; others were making laborious efforts to stand. He clutched the machine-gun and strenuously wrenched himself upright. His eyes focused clearly again. Yin gave a loud shout.

"Comrades! This is hardship. We can't let it get us down. Forward!"

The men all stood up. The climb continued.

A twisting winding path inched up the precipitous height. How fierce and cold was the wind on the mountain! But before long, huge Mount Niulan was left behind them, looking like a solitary peak rising out of the ocean.

The long night passed. As the sun rose in the east, the sound of singing floated up from the banana orchards:

Forward, forward, forward—
Our army advances, warmed by the sun.
With our feet treading our nation's ground,
The hopes of the people are borne on our backs.
We are an invincible force!
. . . . . .

Facing the sun, the political commissar looked with sunken eyes at the line of marchers from whom the song welled forth. In circumstances like these, he thought happily, they still can sing! . . . This is the most moving thing of all!

VIII

There was no time for sleep. An order came over the radio fixing the time within which they had to reach their destination. The distance was no longer figured in days and nights, but in miles and hours.

As the fighters forded the wide Wulihsu River, the political commissar sat on the bank, carefully counting the men of a company. His calculations showed that eighty percent of them walked with limps.

"How is it that so many of them have ruined their feet?" he anxiously asked a political instructor. Aren't there any who can walk normally?"

The political instructor was worried. "Not one. They've all wrecked their feet. Their joints ached when they put their burning feet into the cool water. Crossing the river does it. It makes them limp worse." The political instructor walked on. He was limping too.

Another soldier hobbled by on crude crutches.

"Who is that?" the commissar asked the next man in line.

"His name is Chao."

"Why doesn't he drop out?"

"He doesn't want to."

In order to understand the situation of the men, the commissar followed the group which had just gone by. He knew that the soldier to whom he had spoken was the one who had joined in a charge while suffering badly from illness. The commissar remembered his name well after that incident. He was known as a man of iron. Some people did not fear the enemy but were overwhelmed by physical hardships. This man, however, was afraid of nothing and remained firm wherever he was. The commissar began a conversation with him.

"How are the feet of the men in your squad?"

"All gone bad! Only my case is light. I just broke four blisters—one of them infected."

The commissar was startled. "But you walk as if there was nothing wrong. . . ."

"The more you limp the more effort you waste."

"It's really rough this time. No wonder there are men who are willing to fight, but who hate to march."

"That's the truth, commissar. We all feel the same way. But we'd never get to any place where we *could* fight if we didn't march. Of course the marching is rough. But we can take it!"

This simple answer moved the commissar deeply. Not eighty percent, but one hundred percent of the fighters had injured their feet. Yet they continued to ad-

vance, not stopping a minute. Yesterday they had eaten one meal, then marched through the night. Now, just as they reached a planned resting point, the order arrived to continue marching. Both rest and meal times were cancelled.

They certainly are giving all they have for the cause of the Party, thought the commissar. How many bitter trials must a man experience before he changes from an ordinary inconsequential person to a man who will sacrifice himself for the benefit of the Party, the country and the people! . . . I must check through every Party branch at once and go through the material of every comrade who applied for membership during battle. When he thought of this, the commissar's heart was gay.

He turned to a newspaper reporter by his side. "History should record these hardships. Because of them, we know still better how to build a prosperous life in the future!"

IX

It appeared on the map as "Cockscomb Peak, altitude 5,244 metres." The fighters, tired, hungry and in pain, had to cross this peak before they could go into battle. They hadn't eaten or slept for two days.

Yin was having great difficulty in keeping going. The sickness had turned his face thin and sallow, but to lead the new comrades, he had to hold out. He couldn't be the first to fall. The soles of his feet were completely lacerated. Every step on the raw tender flesh shot a bolt of pain right to his head. The whole weight of his body sagged downward. Burdened by the inexorable pressure of the machine-gun and two knapsacks, in addition he was supporting Chao who leaned on him heavily. Several times, Yin became so feverish

with hunger that sparks danced before his eyes and he felt faint and dizzy.

The road took a sudden steep incline up the mountain. Many of the men sat down, their faces colourless. Supporting his ammunition carrier, Yin continued towards the peak. His body was a mass of perspiration; he was gasping desperately. Then Chao slipped from his grasp and slumped to the ground.

"I just can't go on. There's no strength left in me."

"It's hunger. I'll help you."

"I can't move. . . ."

"Not at all? Come on, try!"

He looked at Chao. The ammunition carrier was wolfing a handful of raw rice. Distressed beyond words, Yin took him by the arm and they went forward. Now Yin was no longer perspiring; he was burning dry body heat. Again and again he bit his lips. . . . His eyes went black . . . he couldn't go on. . . . Death—the word flashed into his mind; involuntary tears flowed from his eyes. . . . He was finished! He was leaving the Party, his comrades; he was leaving the great world-shaking cause. . . . If I have any strength, I can get by. . . . I've come through the last few days and nights; I've been able to stand hunger and sickness. . . . For the people, I can endure all—all. . . . He savagely mustered his resources. Some men had already reached the summit! But he had consumed his last bit of strength. Yin fell to the ground. Everything was dark.

"Yin, Yin! . . ." Chao got confused. "Squad leader! Yin has collapsed! . . ."

But Yin still was not completely spent. He took a deep gasp of the cool fresh air and revived. Through half-closed lids, he could see the stars whirling in a re-

volving sky. It was some time before they became motionless again.

He felt a big hand being removed from his chest. When he forced his eyes open, they were cool and refreshed.

"Yin, do you recognize me?" It was the squad leader's voice.

"Squad leader!" said Yin.

With tears in his eyes, Chao smiled. His hand trembled as he took Yin's hand in his. He had been frightened into a cold sweat, but now he was warm again, and he wanted to share his warmth with Yin.

Yin struggled to a sitting position. The squad leader and the medical attendant relieved him of his equipment.

"Rest a while," they said. "We're almost there. We'll go on first. . . ."

"No! I'm all right now!" Yin was already standing. He resumed the march.

From the top of the mountain, they saw a thick night mist hanging about, through which shone tiny specks of flame—lamplight in the windows of far-away houses.

Suddenly, there was the gruff staccato barking of a machine-gun. Everyone turned in the direction of the sound. Chao could see Yin's spirit flooding back.

"Give me a handful of rice!" Yin snapped, over his shoulder. He was going to build up his energy and join the battle.

After the days and nights of hardship, the victory for which they had been waiting was about to start. There was no time for a meal that night. Yin took his machine-gun and followed the infantry, smashing into the town of Hsiao Tunghsu, on the Nanning-Chinchou Road. They triumphantly joined forces with their brothers of the Fourth Field Army.

The enemy all downed their weapons without firing a shot!

Later, the men were standing guard on captured trucks. In the moonlight, the political commissar approached them from the midst of a group of soldiers.

"Have you men eaten yet?" he asked them.

Yin laughed. "We had a good meal in town." Again he laughed at the look of mystification on the commissar's face.

"We have captured the prisoners," chuckled Chao, "and their capture has made up our 'dinner'!"

X

This was the glorious culmination of the five days and five nights. Then, on the eighth of December, they set out after the forces of Pai Chung-hsi which had collapsed and fled from Nanning. After a thirty *li* pursuit, they chased the enemy up a high mountain and sped up after them. Carrying the machine-gun, Yin and Chao advanced with a squad of infantrymen. They circled round the face, through a pass on the right, to the rear of the mountain, while the enemy peppered them with fire. Chao was stumbling through the deep grass. He was wheezing for breath, but he continued feeding ammunition to the machine-gun. At times they took cover; at times they rushed forward a few dozen paces. Big Yin and his weapon seemed to be forged into one piece of steel. The smell of gunpowder gave him boundless energy. It was as if he had never known hunger or exhaustion. He kept his eyes glued on the enemy.

Then they stormed to the high point, and the Kuomintang soldiers ran in wild confusion. Yin handed the machine-gun to Chao.

"You cover me with this," he ordered. "I'm going to capture some of them." Grasping his hand-grenades, he flew after the enemy.

Before long, he herded his prisoners down from the mountain to the highway.

The Kwangsi campaign ended victoriously.

Yin was awarded a special citation and was admitted to the Communist Party.

After telling him of the decision, the Party secretary said with a smile, "You certainly turned out fine!"

Yin's face reddened. He spoke shyly, but as though taking his oath,

"This is an honour given me by the Party. At any critical time, I gain strength when I think of the Party. Otherwise of what use would I be?"

June 1950

On The Kholchin Grasslands

by Malchinku

Malchinku hails from Inner Mongolia and was born in 1930. He learned to read and write in the Mongolian language from his father in his childhood. His mother used to tell him Mongolian folk tales and teach him to sing Mongolian songs all of which engendered in him an interest in literature. When he reached the age of 15, he joined a Mongolian cavalry unit which was then active at various places in Jehol. In 1946, he worked in an Inner Mongolian cultural troupe. He was greatly influenced by Soviet literature and the works of modern Chinese writers from which he derived much help. His short story "On the Kholchin Grasslands" was published in 1951. In 1952, working with two other writers, he adapted the story into a scenario. Malchinku is now studying in the Central Institute of Literary Research, Peking.

An amazing drama was enacted on the Kholchin grasslands last August.

The evening sun was being swallowed up by the far horizon. A northwest wind was stealthily ruffling the grass till the plain looked like a racing sea, while the dark clouds gathering overhead resembled the calf-skin roof of a tent. Everybody knew the autumn rain was at hand.

Sarangua had driven her cattle back from further than the eye could see. She was riding a big roan horse, accompanied by her favourite hunting dog, little Galu, who followed his mistress wherever she went.

Although the herd strained forward against the high wind, Saran scolded them for being too slow. She cracked her whip continuously and shouted: "Giddup!"

But how could the cattle know this treatment was due to the fact that their mistress was anxious to meet her lover?

When Saran had driven the herd to a sand-dune not far from the village she suddenly reined in her horse and swept the plain for some time with disappointed eyes. "Sanbu! Sanbu!" she called. But there was no one in sight, and no answer to her call. She could do nothing but round up the cattle on the sand-dune and wait for Sanbu in the high wind.

Presently a gray horse came flying like an arrow from the east. Then Saran's heart gave a leap and her face lit up like a blooming flower. Hurriedly jumping down from her horse she took from her breast a pink tobacco pouch with long ribbons, which she waved over her head in welcome. However, as the newcomer drew nearer, her enthusiasm was damped.

It was not her long awaited Sanbu.

A bearded old man galloped up to Saran and reined in his horse.

"What are you doing here, lass?" Actually he knew quite well why she was there, and was simply teasing her.

"What's the hurry, Grandad, that your horse is in such a lather?" she parried his question.

"Very urgent business, and I must call a mass meeting to announce it."

"After the meeting this evening will you go on with the story you didn't finish yesterday?"

"It probably won't be possible. Didn't I say there's very urgent business?"

"Urgent business indeed! Say you won't and have done with it."

"It's true; take my word for it. All right, I must be getting on. You'd better go back soon too, young woman."

The horse galloped off.

This old man, whose name was Amkulan, was both village head and an old Party member. Because he was honest and kind, and because he was the first to accept hardship and the last to take his ease in the service of the people, he had won the confidence and love of the masses. All the young people in the village called him Grandad Amkulan.

After Amkulan had left, Saran started worrying again over Sanbu's delay. She also wondered about the urgent business of Grandad Amkulan.

Just then the northwest wind brought the booming of thunder, and the distant horizon was lit by golden lightning—the prelude to a downpour. But since she had promised to meet her lover, Saran had to wait on.

"Good evening, comrade!" A low, deep voice sounded behind her. "Would you please tell me the name of the village ahead?"

She turned to confront a man lean as a brown goat. His long, unkempt hair seemed to be swarming with lice, his pock-marked face was stained with sweat, and he had over his shoulder a brown blanket. Suspicious of this unexpected arrival, Saran asked rather nervously:

"Who are you, and where are you from?"

"I've come from the Djarut Banner because of the drought there." He deliberately withheld his name.

"Where are you going, and whom are you looking for?"

"When I set out, Malhei of our village asked me to bring a message to Galsan in Bayanundur Village of the Kholchin Banner. Tell me, please, how far Bayanundur Village is from here." Awaiting her answer he eyed her cunningly.

The words "Galsan of Bayanundur" aroused Saran's suspicion. Galsan of her village had been a platoon leader of the Kuomintang troops, and was under sur-

veillance. . . . And now a suspicious character like this had come expressly to ask about another suspicious character. For a long time Saran said nothing. Galu, the little hunting dog beside her, pricked up his ears and looked steadily at the stranger.

"Where is your home in Djarut?"

"Altan Obo Village." He paused, then added hastily: "Only very soon we'll be moving away, because the drought there's terrible. Tell me, comrade, do you know how far Bayanundur Village is or not?"

"Bayanundur Village? Very close," she said slowly. "But we've a rule in Kholchin that travellers must produce their identity cards before they've the right to ask the way. Otherwise people won't tell them."

"Hah!" he gave a crafty smile. "Identity card? I have one all right. Only when I left home my wife was afraid I might lose it on the road, so she sewed it into my pants. It would be rather awkward getting it out here. All right, it's growing dark and I must be moving on. Good-bye!" And he started off.

As Saran watched him go she felt very uneasy. She knew he was a suspicious character, yet she had no means of stopping him. She remembered the Mongolian proverb, "Whoever lets a wolf go sins against the grasslands," and thought: "Since I've met a suspicious character I mustn't on any account let him slip away." At once she hit on a plan, and hurried after the stranger, calling: "Wait a moment, comrade!"

The rascal slowly came to a standstill.

"It's late, and sure to rain by the look of it. Come to my house for a bowl of tea and a rest."

The fellow said nothing, only looked up at the sky reflectively. Just then, as luck would have it, a sudden gust of wind switched the brown blanket he had over his shoulder. A shiver ran down Saran's spine as she saw with amazement the glittering barrel of a gun.

Sure now that he was up to no good, she thought, "I simply must find a way to get him back to the village. No, that's no good; he's so crafty that he'd be able to see through my plan, and then it'd be too late. Now he's looking up at the sky, what's to stop me snatching his gun from him?"

Darting fiercely forward she laid hands on the rogue's gun. He twisted round and struggled desperately with her. However Saran had a firm grip on the gun, and the two of them tugged wildly this way and that.

As she struggled for the gun, Saran shouted: "A saboteur! Come quick!" hoping this would summon the villagers. Little Galu came to her aid, biting the scoundrel till his hands and face ran with blood. The attack from both sides confused the stranger and Saran, giving a fierce tug at the gun, succeeded in wresting it from him. Frenzied with rage he kicked her savagely in the stomach. Although the pain was agonizing, she realized this was a matter of life and death, and that on no account could she let the enemy get the better of her.

Dogs are the most intelligent creatures on the plain. By now the dogs in the distant village had been aroused and were barking wildly. This alarmed the scoundrel even more, and he thought: "I've lost my gun, and soon a pack of dogs from the village may be after me. I could never hope to get away from those Mongolian dogs. Better go while the going's good." He turned and jumped onto Saran's big roan horse. The horse gave a start, but under the pressure of the stranger's legs, it flew off.

It was a Czech gun Saran had seized. Since she was only used to hunting guns, she was unable to manipulate it. In her agitation she took a few steps forward, then fell down. Only little Galu pursued the

stranger, biting the roan horse's hind legs and making it buck like a crazy thing until the rascal was thrown. He scrambled up at once, and, not able to catch the horse again, dropped the brown blanket and took to his heels. Once more Galu gave chase, but gave up when he saw his mistress was not following.

The rascal had spent the last few days on the grasslands, in the desert and wilderness, without a square meal all that time. The fierce struggle with Saran had exhausted him. He had scarcely left the sand-dune before his head started reeling. However he ran on desperately until he saw in front of him a stretch of marshland, where reeds were tossing like ocean waves in an evening gale. He stopped for a moment, then produced a box of matches from his pocket, and dived into the reeds.

By the time little Galu and the big roan horse reached Saran's side again, she was just getting unsteadily to her feet, thinking to herself: "Although I've captured a gun, the enemy's escaped. It's as bad as shooting rabbits and only nicking their fur."

She lowered her head, frowning, to fumble with the gun. There was a sudden click as the safety catch was released. In her joy she forgot her pain and fatigue. Mounting the roan horse, she led little Galu northward in pursuit.

As soon as she had crossed the sand-dune she smelt smoke. Saran gave an exclamation on seeing a sea of fire ahead. She reined in her horse. Consternation made great drops of perspiration run down her forehead.

Fanned by a strong north wind, a raging fire was roaring and crackling furiously. Because it was August, the reeds were dry, and they blazed so fiercely that even a wild duck could not have flown over.

Although Saran was still nearly three hundred

yards from the fire, the dense smoke already made it difficult for her to breathe, and her face stung in the fierce heat. She could not understand how this fire had started.

Marshland is one of the treasures of the plains. Those who live nearby take the reeds to town each year to exchange for cloth, boots, tea, flowered silk, and brocade. Some indeed depend on this for the whole year's food. And now their marshland was a sea of fire. As a Mongolian saying goes: "Fire is the grassland's worst enemy."

"That rogue must have started this fire. But he's wrong if he thinks he can get away with it!" Thereupon Saran brought her whip smartly down on the horse, and without hesitation headed for the blaze.

Flames and smoke formed a lurid line of fire closing in upon her from all sides. Yet her one thought was: "I must break through! The saboteur mustn't get away!" She bent down to call Galu to jump on to the horse. Fearing he would be burnt as they dashed through the fire she wrapped him in the folds of her skirt. By now sparks were raining on her head. She saw that the belt of fire was narrower to the west, and decided to break through there. Given free rein the roan horse like a mad wolf hurtled through the fiery inferno. The intense heat made Saran faint and fall limply over his neck, her head-dress on fire and white smoke wreathing from her clothes. The roan horse was burnt too, and blood dripped from his mouth. As if sympathizing with his mistress he slackened his pace and walked on with lowered head. However at that critical moment his strength failed him. His front legs suddenly buckled under him, his head dropped, and he sank onto the scorched black ground.

As night fell the wind dropped. Saran felt a refreshing coolness as when one takes off furs in June to

plunge into the river. She recovered consciousness. Her eyes opened weakly, then closed again. However when she remembered she was chasing a counter-revolutionary she shook herself and straightened up. She found the heavy Czech gun still slung over her left arm. Only then did she become conscious of the pain of her face, and when she put up her hand to her cheeks, her fingers came away stained with blood. "The roan horse has been hurt in the fire, and I'm still dizzy," she thought. "It would be better to let Galu go first." So she released Galu from her lap, saying: "Go on! Off with you!" Not a hair of his body had been hurt, and he jumped down and dashed in the direction pointed out by his mistress.

Then Saran extinguished the sparks in her clothing, adjusted her dress and pulled the horse to his feet. After leading the horse for a few steps she mounted once more to gallop across the boundless plain through the black, illimitable night.

By now drops of rain were beginning to fall from the dark sky, pelting noisily on the grass.

Sanbu had been to town that day to have his horse shod. Since he was late coming home, he knew Saran must have waited for some time. He bolted his meal and hurried out again. Riding the snow-white horse "Baby Rabbit," a fast runner with staying power, he reached the sand-dune in next to no time. To his surprise Saran was not there. There was not even a sign of her. "Hang it, she's let me down," he thought. Looping his whip he started for her home, but he had no sooner passed the sand-dune than he saw a thick pall of smoke to the north, and flames leaping high. At once he put aside all thought of Saran, and turned back to report to Grandad Amkulan.

As soon as he entered the village, Sanbu yelled all the way: "Fire! A fire in the grasslands!"

Grandad Amkulan had just called a mass meeting and was reading an urgent announcement to the villagers:

"The meeting this evening is for an announcement. First I'll read you the circular from the Banner Security Office." The old man started reading in a grave, deep voice:

People's Government of Tunutug-gacha.

Yesterday we received a notice from the League Security Office regarding the counter-revolutionary Bolu. This criminal joined the Kuomintang in 1947 and held the post of deputy commander of a unit of the reactionary cavalry. He lorded it over the Ar-Kholchin Banner, committing every conceivable crime, plundering the people of over five hundred horses, over seven hundred cattle, and over three thousand sheep. He also raped more than twenty women. . . . His crimes aroused the wrath of the people. Hence when our army liberated the Ar-Kholchin Banner, this criminal changed his name and escaped to a district in the Djarut Banner, where for a long period he carried out subversive activities. The great movement to suppress counter-revolutionaries has struck fear into the hearts of evil-doers, and on the fifteenth of this month he fled. A description of his appearance follows. . . .

Amkulan had just finished reading this announcement and was pausing a moment before embarking on a simple explanation when Sanbu burst into the meeting like a two-year-old colt, completely out of breath. Everybody was taken aback.

"A fire's started, Grandad Amkulan!" he gasped.

"What, a fire!" The whole room was agog.

"Speak plainly, Sanbu, where is the fire?" asked Amkulan.

After Sanbu had given Amkulan a clear account, everybody rose from his seat. Some of those standing in the doorway had already left.

Two simple words—"grassland fire"—yet what an impression they create! There had been many such fires in the past. Homes had been reduced to ashes, while cattle, sheep and camels had perished in the flames. Since the liberation, however, each district had a fire prevention organization, and clauses on fire prevention had been included in patriotic compacts, with the result that no fire had broken out during the past three or four years. Now that the fearful words were heard again, they naturally caused alarm.

On hearing Sanbu's account Amkulan knitted his brows and paced to and fro. Then, he turned to the others:

"Today's meeting is temporarily adjourned. Our first job is to fight the fire. All go home at once to get what's needed, and gather under the old elm east of the village when the bell rings."

Everyone rushed off to carry out the orders.

Amkulan held an emergency meeting with the village cadres and some of the militiamen, at which he said:

"We've had no fire on the Kholchin plain for three or four years, have we? Then what a coincidence that today—just after receiving an urgent notice from the Banner Security Office—such a fierce fire should suddenly break out. There's more to this than meets the eye. We must be very much on our guard."

They all agreed with Amkulan, and immediately posted guards about the village. Amkulan took out his pencil and wrote a few characters in his diary, then he

tore out the page, folded it in three and gave it to Sanbu, saying:

"Deliver this directly to the district government, and bring back a receipt." And to another militiaman he said: "You go and ring the bell."

All the villagers gathered under the old elm tree, men and women, old folk and youngsters who had just laid down their school books. Most of them had brought brooms, others had hoes and sopping wet rugs.

About eight hundred yards from the fire was a hillock like a pyramid of cow dung. Amkulan stood there and waved his arm, and the villagers came to a pause. Old Boyar, who towered a head above the crowd, noticed that the rain was coming down faster and faster, and muttered as if it were an incantation: "When thirst burns your vitals, may you find a peach orchard. When a grassland fire starts, may the north wind bring a downpour."

"Comrades!" shouted Amkulan. "The fire's just ahead. We must learn to fight the fire. We must first break up the enemy forces, then annihilate the different sectors, so to speak."

"But it seems to me this fire is so fierce, if we grapple with it directly we're bound to fail," old Boyar put in before Amkulan had finished. "That means we must burn a 'fire-ditch' in front of the fire, where all the grass be burnt at once so that by the time the fire reaches the ditch, it cannot pass. That way we can put it out safely. This is a lesson we learnt through many years in dealing with fires." He made his proposal very confidently.

"Old Boyar's right, that's the best way—let's do it!" said Amkulan.

"Right! That's the way to deal with grassland fires!"

A roar of approbation rose from the crowd.

"All right, don't shout! We'll carry out old Boyar's proposal. First we must systematically burn a strip in front of the fire. When the fire reaches the passage we have burnt out, we'll divide into teams to cope with the different sections. Fortunately it's going to pour all evening. We're in luck. It just goes to show that we people of the Kholchin plain are Fortune's favourites! Get to work, comrades! When we've finished putting out the fire, our pretty girls will sing to us."

Organized into a big fire fighting force, the three hundred-odd villagers attacked the fire as if they were besieging a city. All persons, regardless of age or sex, were confident of victory as they charged towards the fiery sea.

Sanbu braved the pouring rain to deliver the letter to the district government, but in his eagerness to return and fight the fire, hurried off without waiting for a receipt. Flying like the wind, Baby Rabbit galloped for dear life over the muddy turf. But when he galloped past the eastern sand-dune and turned north, the horse suddenly pricked up his ears and stopped, as if frightened. Sanbu looked in front and saw not far away a dark object. Surprised, he jumped off his horse to have a look at it. It was a brown blanket, soaked through with water. Picking up the blanket he had only taken a couple of steps when he saw another object like a black clod. His flashlight showed it to be a new pink tobacco pouch with long green brocade ribbons embroidered with twining petunias. He gave a puzzled smile: "Who could have had a rendezvous here and dropped this? Well, no matter what pretty girl made it, it's mine now. Still, my Saran can embroider a hundred times better than this." Then he thought: "Fighting the fire's the main thing." He rolled up the pouch and blanket, fastened them to his saddle, and moved on.

Presently he could hear the distant shouts of the

fire fighters and see that the fire was rapidly being extinguished. Only a few minor sections remained, but these also were under control. He was just heaving a sigh of relief when he noticed a line of fire in the south, which was stealthily burning across. That looked bad, because to the east was the largest haystack in the whole district. If the fire were to spread here, the cattle would have nothing to eat that winter. Filled with anxiety he leapt down from his horse and tried to call the others to help, but his voice was lost in the sizzling of the flames. Thereupon thrusting the tobacco pouch into his pocket, he took the wet blanket from the saddle, and dashed towards the conflagration which was spreading eastwards.

Baby Rabbit retreated a little further from the fire to wait for his master.

Sanbu was very brave, yet it would be interesting to know what he was thinking when he leapt into the fire. He was not so mad as to seek death by burning. Far from it. He was a level-headed, intelligent youth. But he was a twenty-two-year-old Youth Leaguer. When he saw the raging fire thrusting like a poisonous snake towards the big haystack, and it looked as if presently the towering goat grass would be ablaze, he leapt into the fire without any thought of the danger.

A wet blanket is the best thing to fight fire. Sanbu used it to extinguish flames right and left. However it is not easy to move in a raging fire. The thick smoke suffocated him; the flames seared him agonizingly. But he paid no attention to them, thinking, "If only I can put out this fire, I don't care if I'm burned."

Exhausted and dizzy from the dense smoke, he pulled himself together for a spell, but then all went black before his eyes and he staggered and fell. Little tongues of flame still darted around him.

Amkulan hurried from east to west and back again,

encouraging the villagers and inspecting the work of each team, until he was ready to drop. Thanks to the villagers' efforts and the pouring rain the great fire was finally extinguished.

"Hey, look! There's still fire in the east!" shouted old Boyar.

"How could a fire have started there too?"

Amkulan looked eastwards and saw another blaze there. Gasping for breath he hurried over, and was able to make out a black form lying in the flames. He exclaimed, "Someone's lying in the fire. Hurry up and get him out!"

The villagers ran forward, old Boyar at their head. He rushed into the fire with eyes closed and bated breath, picked up the unconscious form and darted back again. Then the others helped carry the injured man some distance from the fire, and discovered it was Sanbu.

Led by Amkulan the villagers put out this fire too.

Then Amkulan went over to Sanbu to call him by his name, but the lad remained unconscious and gave no reply.

"We'd better hurry up and carry him back," said a youth.

"No, that doesn't matter," said Amkulan. "He's been overcome by the smoke. As soon as he breathes fresh air he'll come round."

Sure enough, very soon Sanbu recovered consciousness. Still feeling weak and dizzy, he made no answer to Boyar's friendly questions. Boyar knew his daughter and Sanbu were in love, and he himself was fond of the lad.

"He's come to," said Amkulan to the villagers, "and the fire has been extinguished. The rain's getting heavier, we'd better go back. Only the captain of the militia must post some militiamen as guards to see that no further fires break out."

Black night covered the boundless grasslands. Although the fire had been put out, the treasure of the plains—the reeds of the big marsh—had been burnt to the ground. Tired and sick at heart, they all walked home in silence.

On the way back Sanbu's head cleared. He gave Amkulan and Boyar a complete account of how he had picked up the blanket and the tobacco pouch on his way back from delivering the message, and also of his experience later in fighting the fire.

"You say besides picking up a blanket, you picked up a tobacco pouch?" said Amkulan, as they entered the village administration office.

"See, here it is." Sanbu produced the pouch from his pocket and handed it to Amkulan.

"Aha! This is very interesting," said Amkulan as he took the pouch and opened it. "There's a paper inside. Why, it's a letter."

"Whose letter? What does it say?" asked Sanbu and Boyar simultaneously.

After glancing through the letter, Amkulan looked bewildered.

"Strange! What can it mean?" he wondered. "The blanket, the letter . . . and on such a dark and rainy night. Very odd."

"What does it mean?"

"Do you see whose letter this is?" He handed it to Sanbu.

"Why, it's a note to me from Saran," Sanbu cried.

"What's happened to my Saran?" exclaimed Boyar.

"Did your daughter bring the cattle back this evening?" asked Amkulan.

"I didn't see her, but she may have gone to fight the fire with the others. She's one of the women activists, and wouldn't shirk!"

"Better go home and see whether she's really back or not."

"What could have happened? Right, I'll go and have a look." As he spoke Boyar departed.

Dear Sanbu,

This tobacco pouch is not very pretty, but I tired my fingers out sewing it. It's for you.

Saran.

August 21

As Sanbu read the letter, his eyes grew round as saucers, and he looked completely at sea.

"Don't you think it strange? It's strange the letter has been here side by side with the blanket," said Amkulan.

"Strange! Very strange!" Cold sweat was pouring down Sanbu's face. "This suspense is terrible."

"Don't get worked up, lad. When Boyar comes back we'll know."

The door of the outer room slammed as Boyar rushed in with a number of villagers at his heels. Failing to find Saran at home he had called at several houses.

"She left this morning and hasn't been back since," Boyar told Amkulan. "We've looked all over the village, but no one knows anything about her."

"No, when I was coming back from the district government at sunset, I saw her on the east sand-dune. I thought she must be waiting for Sanbu."

"Yes, we had arranged to meet today, but when I got to the east sand-dune she wasn't there."

"Why should she stay out for no reason? What else did you say to her, Sanbu? Why does it happen just today she hasn't come back?"

Although Boyar trusted Sanbu, his anxiety made

him speak very sternly. It was the first time he had treated Sanbu like this.

Sanbu felt as if he had been given a slap in the face. Unable to speak he stared at the light for a time, then tears came to his eyes.

After a moment's reflection Amkulan took up the brown blanket and said: "I take rather a different view of this. All look at this blanket—a brown blanket. When I read the notice from the Banner Security Office at the meeting just now, it said that escaped felon Bolu was carrying a brown blanket. It's strange too that those fires broke out this evening. If we just quarrel among ourselves instead of considering these questions, we won't get anywhere."

Boyar looked up in embarrassment, glanced at the company, and said to himself: "The proverb says: 'A blind man can crawl all his life without getting out of the Kholchin grasslands.' I'm an old fool. Although my hair's white I'm still muddle-headed. Amkulan's quite right. Sanbu can't be blamed for Saran's disappearance. I know he loves her." Then turning to Sanbu he asked, "Are you still angry with me, lad?"

Sanbu got up slowly, and said: "No, I'm not angry with anyone. What worries me is how to get Saran back quickly. I tell you, I can't be at ease for a single second while she's disappeared."

Just then the militia captain and security officer who had heard of Saran's disappearance hurried in perspiring.

"Good, you've come just at the right time," said Amkulan. "I was about to send someone for you."

When Amkulan had studied the situation with the militia captain, the security officer, Sanbu, Boyar and the others, he decided to divide the village militiamen into several groups to search different parts of the plain

for Saran. He also wrote a report to the district government.

Amkulan, Sanbu and three other militiamen formed one group, to search northwards.

Saran had kept after the counter-revolutionary.

The storm raged violently over the grasslands, crashes of thunder and flashes of lightning were making people feel the shaking of the earth. Before Saran, stretched the black, empty wilderness. She could only guess at the direction and terrain, guided by her years of experience in cattle herding here. But it is difficult to advance so much as an inch on the grasslands in the rain because everywhere is a mass of mud. Occasionally the roan horse floundered, and horse and rider fell together into the muddy water. But Saran did not lose heart, and after each fall got up again to go on with the chase.

When her burns came in contact with the water the pain was agonizing. "How far will I have to chase him on this vast plain?" she wondered. Just then a flash of lightning enabled her to see footsteps in the mud, and this encouraged her to go on, thinking: "Shar-mringol River is to the west, and because of this heavy rain it will be in flood. He won't go there. The north's the only possible way."

She could dimly make out a small hill ahead, with some young elms on it. Not only had Saran often brought the cattle here in the past, but it was on this hill Sanbu had first proposed to her. All kinds of flowers grew on the hill, and she remembered how once Sanbu had put two blossoms in her head-dress. . . . In her mind's eye she saw Sanbu's handsome mouth and gay smile, and was lost for a moment in memories of their love.

Suddenly, short barks were heard from the hill, and

Saran's heart missed a beat, though whether from pleasure or fear she herself could hardly say.

"Galu must have found the saboteur," she thought.

Ascending the hill she did her best to make the horse go slowly and quietly, trying to pierce the darkness with her eyes. She hoped little Galu would give her another sign, but he was silent.

"Ha! Let's see you bite again, damn dog!" A man's deep voice sounded triumphantly from the slope seven or eight yards away. Straining her eyes Saran could see a black figure climbing the hill, and behind it another black form lying on the ground.

"The scoundrel must have killed Galu!" she thought, and in a fit of fury rushed towards him and fired. The black figure flew like the wind. "He has no gun," she thought. "I needn't kill him; better capture him alive!" She caught up and struck him with the butt of the gun. Saran heard him give a cry and fall. With her finger on the trigger she shouted: "Don't move!" (She remembered this was something soldiers said.) The black form neither spoke nor stirred. "I may have knocked him out," she thought. Alighting from her horse she was just going over to tie him up, when she heard the click of a rifle behind her, and then a shout: "Don't move, or we'll fire!"

Saran trembled all over, and thought: "It's all up! I've fallen into a trap and been surrounded! But I must be a true Mongolian, and show no fear."

"Who are you? If you come any nearer I'll fire!" she shouted at the top of her voice.

"Hi! Is that Saran?" It was a man's voice which Saran knew and loved. Then the bright light of an electric torch lit up her mud-stained figure.

"It's really you, Saran, dear child!" cried Amkulan,

jumping down from his horse. There were others behind him.

"Grandad Amkulan! Sanbu!" Never before had these names sounded so dear and wholly admirable to Saran. With tears in her eyes she ran forward and grasped Amkulan warmly.

"Good girl! Hold on a bit. Tell me, was it you who fired just now?"

"Yes. I'd seized the saboteur's gun, and I knocked him out with it."

Saran embraced Sanbu too, then took his torch to shine on the prostrate black form. They looked where she turned the torch, and saw a pock-marked man getting up and ready to make off.

"Want to escape, you wretch? Halt!"

Amkulan strode over to the frightened rogue, and asked: "Who are you? What are you doing?"

"I—I'm an ordinary citizen." Gold teeth flashed as he spoke.

"Oh, I know you, you're Deputy Leader Bolu of the Ar-Kholchin Banner."

"What nonsense! I'm of the Kholchin Banner."

"Think you can talk your way out of this? You are mistaken."

"It was this rogue who set fire to the northern marsh," said Saran indignantly.

Bolu rolled his eyes and said nothing.

"No use reasoning with a counter-revolutionary," said Amkulan to the militiamen. "Tie him up and take him off."

The sight of the enemy being tied up made Saran inexpressibly happy. Then Sanbu came up and gripped her hand, saying, "You've had a tough time, Saran."

"No, it was my duty."

They laughed.

"Saran's quite right: this is the duty of every Mongolian."

"Grandad Amkulan! My little Galu had been with me for four years, and killed three wolves who were after the cattle; but today. . . ." She faltered and stopped.

Amkulan stroked her hair and said: "I feel for you, child. Your hair's been scorched, your face is swollen with burns, and your favourite dog's been killed. But I don't think this is sad. You ought to understand, that man you caught is Bolu, the counter-revolutionary most hated by the people of the Djarut and Kholchin Banners, and all the people of the Inner Mongolia. So you've not only wiped out a pest for the grasslands, but brought glory on us!" After a pause he went on: "I should tell you, your Sanbu did something pretty fine for the grasslands too. In fighting the fire he leapt right into the flames, until finally he was overcome by the smoke and fell. You are both true Mongolians of the Mao Tse-tung era. The bandit Chiang Kai-shek used to call us Mongolians 'barbarians, brought up on cow-dung.' But today we 'barbarians,' under the guidance of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party, have become a new, advanced people, as strong as steel. Not only can we build up our homeland's border region—beautiful Inner Mongolia, we also know how to protect it. Since the drive to suppress counter-revolutionaries scum like Bolu have had to leave the towns. But if they think that they can knock about two or three years on the plain, they're wrong. It's no longer the plain as they knew it. On this vast grassland a great net has been stretched for them!"

Bolu hung his head as Amkulan spoke.

The black clouds overhead rolled southwards, and in the eastern sky dawn appeared. The flowers carpet-

ing the grasslands raised their heads smilingly, while high in the sky wild geese cried.

The sun had risen.

January 1952

Ahmad and Pakya

by Wang Yu-hu

Wang Yu-hu was born in 1924 in a village of Ping-yuan County, Hopei Province. He joined the revolution when he was only thirteen. The War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression broke out in 1937 and he went to work in bases in the enemy's rear. He thus grew up in the midst of war, educated by the Communist Party. In 1949, he went with his military unit to Sinkiang Province where he has remained.

In the same year (1949), he became the editor of the Army journal "Young Comrades-in-Arms." A love for writing was aroused in him and he started on a literary career. His works include the plays "Let's Fight Our Way into Chiang Kai-shek's Territory" and "The Heroes of Mount Chiuku"; the opera "Mount Chiuku"; and the novels "Conspiracy on Beitk Mountain" and "Army Commander Cheng Yueh-chang."

The short novel "Ahmad and Pakya" which we include here has also been adapted into a film scenario by the author himself.

We, Kazakh men and women,
By many rules were bound.
'Twas said 'tis law, morality,
But nothing good in them I found.
They stole the woman that I loved
And plunged me deep in woe.
We had no good rules in the past,
We had no honest law.
Today, the one I love is free,
Today, there's a law, and to me
It's sweeter than honey could ever be.
What is this law? You want to know?
I'll tell you—it's the Marriage Law!

In the spring of 1950, the district people's court in Chitai County, Sinkiang Province, was reviewing a number of pre-liberation cases, among them that of a Kazakh woman by the name of Pakya. According to the court files and trial records, she was a bandit. Careful investigations disproved this allegation and showed her to be a respectable woman. Her story amazed us and convinced us that far from being an ordinary woman, she was one of exceptional courage.

After her release from gaol, the government granted her a loan to enable her to start life anew. For the first time in many years a smile appeared on her tired and begrimed face. She looked gratefully at the government cadres, her eyes bright with tears. There was wonder in them too, for not even in her wildest dreams did she think such kindness was possible.

In gaol, doing hard labour, she looked to all like a woman of forty. Now, when she had washed her face and put on a clean dress, we saw to our amazement that she was a handsome young woman. And that is exactly what she was—twenty-five years old. Yet, if you looked carefully, you could see faint lines under her eyes, and the barely perceptible droop of her mouth and the sombre look in her eyes showed that she had suffered much in her life. Nevertheless, in spite of all this, her laugh had remained simple and natural, like that of all Kazakh girls.

Pakya settled down with a neighbouring Kazakh tribe. Many tribesmen came to congratulate her on her release and offered to find her a good husband. But, while appreciating their kindness, she always declined their offers. The mere mention of marriage made her sad.

"Haven't you said that you have no husband?" they would ask.

In reply Pakya would burst into tears. Some would look inquiringly at her and would gently ask her what's the matter.

Pakya never told them what was in her heart. She would only think sadly:

"Was he really shot long ago, as everyone says? No, he can't be dead. A man as brave and clever must be alive. . . ." This hope would comfort her. But soon she would begin doubting again.

"Maybe he is dead. Handcuffed and fettered in gaol, he could have been easily killed by one little bullet!" And tears would rush out of her eyes and roll down her cheeks.

"No, he can't be dead!" she would again console herself. "I won't believe he's dead until I see his body. I'll wait for him! . . ."

Lost in thought, she would remain completely silent. And the tribesmen, unable to understand her sorrow, looked at her with wonder and pity.

One day, a cloud of dust appeared on the horizon. A black speck was flying towards the settlement with the swiftness of an arrow. The eyes of the tribesmen except Pakya's turned expectantly in the direction of the speck. With her head down, she was thinking of her husband, not in the least infected by the curiosity of the tribesmen.

"Ha, it's a horse—and fast! Some horseman that man is!"

Hearing this praise, Pakya unconsciously glanced in the direction of the approaching cloud of dust, then lowered her head again.

The horse, its tail streaming, was galloping like wind. As it came nearer, the tribesmen saw the rider clearly.

"Oh, what a strapping young fellow! He looks smart with that red tie!"

At these words of praise, Pakya involuntarily looked up.

The man was certainly a strapping and smart-looking young Kazakh. Practically lying on the horse's mane, he was spurring it on, lashing at it with the whip which he was holding in his right hand. The scarf on his fur cap was bright red, and the feathers which adorned the cap were streaming in the wind. As the rider approached, the tribesmen saw his round, ruddy face, his sharp and bright eyes.

"Who can this be?" they asked each other. Pakya's curiosity was aroused too.

As the young man jumped off his steed, he was surrounded by the tribesmen. Pakya was the only exception, remaining sitting where she was, motionless.

"Is there a newcomer named Pakya in your settlement?" the young Kazakh, still panting from his fast ride, eagerly asked the tribesmen before they had a chance to speak.

At this question all eyes turned to Pakya, who stood up when she heard her name. Clearly agitated, she stared at the stranger and started towards him. The young man, though appearing as if he had never seen her, began to move towards her too—only his step was faster than Pakya's.

As they approached within three steps of each other, they stopped dead, each looking at the other one doubtfully, as if searching for something. The young man's glance finally stopped on a barely visible birthmark over the girl's right eyebrow, while she saw a scar, evidently left by a horse's kick, on his right wrist.

"Ahmad!" she cried, flinging herself into his arms and bursting into tears.

"Don't cry, Pakya!" he said, trying to control his voice and caressing her ruffled hair.

The tribesmen stood around expectantly. . . .

The scene goes back seven years. In the Karyakasi grassland of the Altai-Chingil Basin there then lived more than a thousand Kazakh families of the Moregh tribe. Among them were a sturdy young man and a beautiful girl. The young man's name was Ahmad. He was the son of a poor herdsman. The girl Pakya came from a comparatively well-to-do family. They had grown up together, together they looked after herds, together they played and sang, as their families moved from place to place in search of new pastures. By the time they were both eighteen, their childhood friendship had ripened into true, lasting love. They often discussed their future in secret, hoping their parents would let them marry and live happily.

It was a beautiful life that they dreamed of. True, Ahmad was only a shepherd without a single horse of his own, but he was an extremely able young fellow: not only a good herdsman, but also a fine horseman and an excellent shot.

"If only I could save something," he would confide to Pakya, who believed in him, "I could buy some cattle and tend them well and increase my herd. And in my spare time I could go hunting in the hills and make extra money. Then I could marry you, and we would work still better and have a happy home!"

And so they spoke of this happy future, but even in such moments the thought of Kazakh marriage customs worried them. They were always afraid that giant hands might drag them apart and set them down on the opposite sides of a deep chasm where they would be within sight but out of reach of each other. This they feared all the more since Ahmad was only a herdsman without a single horse, while Pakya's family was relatively well off. Moreover, her father was a conservative-minded, miserly old man. The thought that

they might not be allowed to marry increased their worries.

Often Ahmad would say bitterly and anxiously:

"I'm a poor lout without a horse to my name; your father will never agree to our marriage!"

"Don't worry!" Pakya would try to console him. "Nobody's going to sell me as they do cattle. I promise you we'll be together all our life."

Thus she reassured Ahmad whenever he would brood over their future.

Eventually Ahmad stopped worrying and set about to make his dream come true. He confided to his father. The old man thought such a match improbable, but not impossible, and he was willing to help his son all he could.

"If her father's willing, I will borrow a few horses and a dozen head of cattle for you, and will send a go-between," he said, although he little believed in a successful outcome. But loving his son, he could not think of discouraging him.

His spirits high, Ahmad strode with a light step to the place where he and Pakya had agreed to meet that day. He was eager to tell her what his father had agreed to do for him. He climbed a little hill and found Pakya sitting on a rock, waiting for him. But as he approached her, he saw that she had been crying, her cheeks were still wet from tears and her eyes red. She looked silently at him, and tears again rushed to her eyes. Ahmad asked her anxiously what had happened, but she only started weeping still more bitterly. When she had finally told him, Ahmad clenched his fists, his eyes smouldering with wrath. Pakya was sobbing in his arms.

The previous day, she told Ahmad, her father had a guest. The man was the magistrate of the Hawen League of Chingho County, a rich cattle owner and

merchant. He had brought along a go-between, hoping to get Pakya, renowned as a beauty, as wife for his son. After the civilities had been exchanged, the magistrate started discussing with Pakya's father the question of her price. This brought to an end their polite conversation and laughter; they acted like merchants at a fair haggling over the price, shouting themselves hoarse. The match was finally agreed upon: Pakya's father was to receive sixty horses for her.

Pakya sobbed and stormed, but the only effect this had on her father was to rouse his wrath against her. Her mother, however, sympathized with her. She was loath to part with her hard-working daughter. At the same time she felt it was very strange that such a prominent and "respected" man as this rich cattle owner should want his son to marry into such an ordinary family as theirs. Suspecting that the bridegroom must be either blind or lame, or deficient in some other way, she sided with her daughter, but all she got for her pains was a bad beating.

Ahmad and Pakya's beautiful dream was shattered, but they refused to believe that this would mean their separation. The tragic turn of events only made their love stronger.

Time was passing quickly. According to Kazakh customs, five ceremonies must be performed between the betrothal and the marriage. Two of these ceremonies were soon done with. First, at the betrothal ceremony, the two families exchanged gifts and discussed and settled all outstanding questions. The second ceremony took place in the bridegroom's yurt, when it was settled what other gifts, in addition to the horses, the bride's family would receive. These gifts included clothes, bedding and linen. The third ceremony was the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride's home to take her to the wedding ceremony. On this occasion, the bridegroom

would come with many presents. The fourth ceremony was a repetition of the third. The fifth ceremony was the coming of the bride to her husband's home, and usually it was only after this that a Kazakh couple would begin to live as husband and wife.

We do not know why Kazakh marriage customs are so elaborate. In fact, most Kazakh tribesmen themselves did not know, but simply did what their fathers and mothers and grandparents and great-grandparents had done before them. Some, of course—particularly the poor—did not follow the custom. Sometimes, they even had what was called "double exchange weddings," that is, marrying off a son and daughter into the same family and at the same time. In this way they dispensed with all ceremonies and gifts. But the rich Kazakhs, who observed conventions, considered any marriage but the one prescribed by custom both shameful and illegal. Why so, they could not say. They only knew that these repeated marriage ceremonies gave them a chance to display their wealth and build up a reputation. Moreover, such ceremonies were convenient because they made it possible for the bridegroom's parents to pay for the bride in instalments and gave both sides a chance to squeeze everything possible from each other.

The "respected" magistrate, well known for his wealth, naturally complied with these conventions. Two ceremonies had already taken place, and he was now about to hold the third ceremony.

There was much bustle and excitement that day among the Moregh tribesmen. During the day there were horse races, lasso-throwing competitions and wrestling contests. In the evening, young men strummed the dunbra[1] and sang, and old men told stories.

1 A Kazakh two-stringed musical instrument.

The only two who were not enjoying were Ahmad and Pakya. True, Ahmad had taken part in the races during the day and had actually thrown the bridegroom, who had insisted on racing him, from his horse; but after the race he had wandered off. Pakya was even more miserable. She stayed in the yurt the whole day crying. Late that night, she was dragged to the bridegroom's yurt, but, driven desperate, she managed to escape. The next day the bridegroom had to return home disappointed.

The impending marriage did not kill Ahmad and Pakya's love. On the contrary, it grew stronger and became the talk of the settlement. Eventually it reached the ears of the bridegroom's family. Pakya was cursed and beaten by her father. The bridegroom's powerful family repeatedly attempted to intimidate Ahmad, threatening to have him thrown into gaol. But all this, instead of cowing them, had the opposite effect and increased their love. Only now they were forced to meet secretly.

Then came the day of the wedding. This time Pakya could not escape and was dragged on to a horse. On her arrival, she was thrown into the yurt where she stared silently at the splendid furnishings, desperate and completely indifferent to the celebrations outside: races, lasso-throwing competitions, wrestling contests, music and songs.

Late at night, the bridegroom entered the yurt. Pakya's tear-stained face looked to him more beautiful than ever, and he attacked her. Anticipating him, Pakya hit him hard in the ear. This infuriated the bridegroom, and he snatched a whip from the tent-pole and lashed at her, but she dodged, nimbly darted across and wrested the whip from his hand. There followed a struggle in the course of which the bridegroom again got hold of the whip, but Pakya grabbed a wooden box

and struck him on the head. He fell bleeding, then sprang to his feet and rushed at her like a wild beast. By now their shouts and struggle had been heard outside, and people began crowding into the yurt. Pakya was tied up and thrown into another—small and dark—yurt.

After that Pakya was often beaten and abused, but neither blows nor abuse could weaken her. Her one thought was to escape and find Ahmad. But that appeared impossible: she had been causing so much trouble that several armed men were assigned to guard her. But even if she had not caused all this trouble and had been an ordinary woman, it would still have been difficult for her to escape. According to Kazakh custom, women were exchanged for cattle, and no Kazakh would give even a poor nag for nothing, much less a woman who had cost so many horses. So, when a Kazakh woman was sold to the bridegroom's family, she was expected not only to be a good wife and mother, but also to work more than a man. She had to do all the chores at home and raise cattle. When her husband died she was not free to choose another, but had to marry the dead man's brother or, if he had none, some other relative. Such was custom and it had to be followed. And if it was extremely difficult even for an obedient wife to leave her in-laws, it was doubly so for a spitfire like Pakya. Her chances of escape were indeed hopeless.

News of Pakya's plight spread rapidly, and soon reached Ahmad's ears. Grieved and angered, he could neither eat nor sleep. He became morose and silent, and spent most of the time staring into space. His father, feeling sorry for him, tried to console him:

"Forget her, son! Didn't I tell you it wouldn't work?"

"Pakya's mine!" Ahmad raged. "He's stolen her, but I'll get her back!"

"He has money and power. Don't go trouble shooting. You're my only son...." The old man broke down and burst into tears.

But neither circumstances nor his father's entreaties, neither the angry curses of Pakya's father nor the sneers of some of the old tribesmen at his "improper" conduct could thwart Ahmad's love for Pakya. He made up his mind to rescue her and, this done, to leave the tribe and start life anew somewhere else.

One day, he borrowed a horse, took his hunting gun and, choosing a moment when people were busy elsewhere, galloped to the grassland where Pakya was held virtually a prisoner. He had ridden thirty miles to reach the border of his tribe's settlement, and was only three or four miles away from the yurt of the league magistrate. Cantering along the border in the hope of picking some information, he was taken for a thief, and saw a dozen horsemen rushing towards him. Seeing that things were taking an ugly turn, Ahmad reeled his horse and fled. A bullet whistled over his head, another hit the horse. Had he not been a skilful horseman he would have lost his life or fallen prisoner.

This failure did not make Ahmad lose hope. On his return to the tribe, he analysed his experience and hit on an excellent plan. One day, he confided this plan to his closest friend, another bold young man, who sympathized with him. The friend promised to help and, disguised as a peddler, went to the settlement where the league magistrate lived.

Ahmad's friend spent several days in the neighbourhood of the magistrate's yurt. Instead of going around the district as any other peddler would have done, he circled round the league magistrate's home. Very soon he discovered the small tent where Pakya was held, and learned that in the night her guard often fell

asleep. One night, finding him so, he slipped into the tent.

After this visit, Pakya appeared to have changed. She pretended that she was weakening and that she was repenting her "crime." Her guards were somewhat puzzled by this submissiveness, but the plan worked and they became less vigilant. This enabled Pakya to move about freely. And soon Ahmad's friend reappeared on the scene, surreptitiously passed to her a message from Ahmad and hastily made off.

One pitch dark night, when a gale was blowing and everybody was asleep, Pakya slipped out of the yurt and stealthily made her way to the stud. There she found four bridled, though unsaddled, horses. Without losing a moment, she jumped on one of them and, leading the other three, galloped off in a northwesterly direction. Having ridden about two miles, she saw a light ahead and spurred her steed towards it. As she was approaching the light, Ahmad hastened forward to meet her.

"We must go far away!" he cried. "We must find another place to live in!"

The words were barely out of his mouth when he saw a sea of torches in the distance and quickly extinguished the fire. Another moment passed, and they could already hear the clamour of voices and the thudding of hoofs.

"Quick!" shouted Ahmad, and they threw themselves on the horses and sped off.

The torches, the shouts of the pursuers and the thunder of hoofs were drawing nearer and nearer. Fast as they rode, they just could not escape the infernal glare of the torches and the din. This was quite natural, because the faster they rode the easier it was for their pursuers to hear them. Ahmad should have known this for he had chased bandits at night and had learned how to detect their movements by putting his

ear to the ground. Also, hunting at night, he always relied on his sense of hearing. But now, excited and only thinking of how to escape, he completely forgot about this.

The bright rays of the torches finally picked them out. Shots rang out and a hail of bullets whizzed past.

"Keep your head down!" Ahmad called softly to Pakya.

The torches were now closer, shots rang out faster and the cries of their pursuers became deafening. Suddenly Pakya felt something heavy dragging at her. The horse she was leading had been hit, and fell. The next moment the horse she was riding was killed. Ahmad leapt to the ground and, without stopping to ask Pakya, whether she had been wounded, lifted her on to the horse he was leading, and they galloped off faster than before. But they had not gone far before Pakya's horse stumbled and fell, hit by a shot from the pursuers. The latter were very close now, and could be heard shouting:

"They can't get away!..."

"Be careful! Don't kill them!..."

Desperate, Ahmad raised his hunting gun and fired in the direction of the voices. By the light of the torches he and Pakya could see several riders drop from their saddles, either from fear or because they had been hit. Wasting no time for reflection, Ahmad took Pakya in his arms, sat her down on the last remaining horse, jumped behind her and sped off like lightning, soon disappearing in the dark vastness.

By daybreak Ahmad and Pakya had reached a mountain range. They did not know where they were, nor whether they were heading north, south, east or west. They regained their sense of direction only when they saw the sun rise. They had no definite idea of where they wanted to go, their one thought being to get

as far away as possible. So they galloped in a south-easterly direction.

They themselves did not mind either hunger or thirst, but their horse was panting, its mouth was foaming, and it was tottering so badly it looked as if it might fall at any moment. Knowing well that, should they be pursued again, the horse would be their only hope, they began to look for and finally found grass and water.

It took them a whole day and night of hard riding to bypass the undulating mountains. Another day's ride brought them within sight of yurts and cattle, but not daring to come too near to the settlement, they cautiously approached a young shepherd. From the boy they learned that this little community was not under the jurisdiction of the Chingil River administration, but had left its own tribe and had been camping there for more than a year. Reassured, Ahmad and Pakya rode towards the yurts. The tribesmen gazed at them with curiosity and asked them where they were from. Ahmad replied that they had just been married and had taken their herd into the hills where they were waylaid by robbers and barely escaped with their lives. The tribesmen treated them kindly, and Ahmad got a job as a herdsman with one of the richer tribesmen, while Pakya was hired as a milkmaid and servant. Thus they lived peacefully for half a year.

But news of their escape to this settlement soon reached the Chingil River administration. The league magistrate had reported it to Usman, then puppet commissioner of Asan, and one evening Ahmad and Pakya were arrested.

They were taken to Asan where Usman tried them. He charged them with disloyalty and accused them of violating the holy commandments of the god Huta, of flouting Kazakh conventions, morals and laws. He decided to make an example of them and sentenced them

to death. Before being sent to the Chingil River to be executed, he threw them into prison. Here, on the eve of the day they were to be sent back, they escaped.

Having learned a lesson, Ahmad and Pakya were planning to go far, far away. Ahmad hid Pakya in a gully and went away alone. When he returned, he had four horses with him, two rifles on his back, several heavy bundles and ample food supplies.

"Where did you get all this?" Pakya asked uneasily.

"Stole it!"

Pakya gave a cry of dismay.

"I'm not a thief! I'm not a rustler!" Ahmad said indignantly although he was not really angry with her.

"But...." Pakya refrained from completing her question.

"I stole all this from the commissioner's office, from the office of the commissioner who had locked us up and who was going to have us shot!"

Pakya set her mind at rest. Taking anything from such a man as the commissioner was not stealing. Her Ahmad was no thief. His strength and courage made her admire him still more. With such a husband, she thought, she was afraid of nothing.

They set off to go far away, determined to find some uninhabited place where they could live in peace. They did not know where to find such a spot. They travelled for hundreds of miles, crossed mountains and rivers and large stretches of the vast Gobi Desert. Finally, they decided on a mountain on the border of the Mongolian People's Republic, between the Altai and Tienshan Mountains.

This was the Beitk Mountain. As children they had heard old people say that this spot was uninhabited, that it was full of pines and wild beasts and that shepherds and even hunters were afraid to go there. But

that was exactly the kind of place they were looking for. So, without pausing to rest, they pressed on day and night towards their goal.

Their life on the Beitk Mountain may sound incredible, like a fairy-tale old people tell. They gathered wild garlic, onions and fruits; hunted wild goats and hares. They had never eaten raw flesh, but hunger compelled them to do so, and soon they got used to it. They slept in caves or on soft rushes; occasionally, they climbed some old bent pine and slept on its branches.

Spring came. . . . Brooks rippled and flowers bloomed all around them. They sang love songs and were happy.

With the advent of summer, wild animals began to roam in the area. Ahmad and Pakya built themselves a shelter in a big pine tree, where they could live in safety and with certain comfort. They had nearly spent all their ammunition and Ahmad, wishing to save a few rounds for emergency, set traps to catch animals. Once, in a storm, they just missed being struck by lightning which set the forest on fire. But this proved a blessing in disguise. For the first time in many months they saw fire and hoped to use it to cook food. Soon, however, there was a downpour and the flames were doused. When the rain stopped, Ahmad and Pakya dashed to the spot where they found—and luckily—one rotten stump still smouldering. They carried it back as carefully as if it were some treasure, and began to blow on it, but the harder they blew the smaller became the fire, until nothing remained but embers. Then they wrapped the stump in grass, but the grass was damp.

Suddenly Ahmad remembered a game he and his friends played when they were children—they would empty a cartridge of its powder, pour it into the barrel of a toy gun, then set a spark to it, and it would burst into flame. Cheered by this idea, he broke open a

cartridge, poured out the powder and told Pakya to put the charred wood on some comparatively dry twigs and grass. Then he sprinkled some powder on it. To their delight, it burst into flame. They kept up the fire for many days and were able to cook food, until another hurricane completely extinguished the fire.

Time was passing quickly. Autumn had come to Beitk and winter was close on its heels. Far from the civilized world, the young couple dreaded the coming of the bitter winter, and started preparing for it as well as they could. They found a little cave, and at its entrance they hung a curtain they had made of animal skins. Out of other skins they made winter clothes for themselves. They stored up food supplies. Fire was the only thing they lacked, and without it they could cook no food, and the cave, however tightly sealed, would still be icy cold.

One day, Pakya was making thread out of some old and tattered cotton. As she tore it and twisted it into strands by rolling it in her hands, she became conscious of warmth; and, perhaps because it was cold, this warmth made her think of fire. She spoke of it to Ahmad and he hit on an idea. Taking a strip of cotton, he rolled it tightly and started rubbing it, not between his hands but with a stick on a flat rock. The cotton became hot. Ahmad rubbed still harder and it started smouldering. Then he tore off a bit of the cotton and blew on it—and it burst into flame! Excited by the success of his experiment, Ahmad stared at the flame fascinated. It was only when the cotton had burnt out and the flame scorched his fingers that he came out of the trance. Once again he used powder to reinforce the spark on the cotton, and soon had a blaze going. From then on, life became more pleasant. They were able to cook their food, roast or boil meat. But they had no pans or pots, and used the most unorthodox methods to

prepare food. They found a suitable rock and Ahmad, after much labour, hollowed it out. This stone pot, of course, could not be heated enough to cook food, so they would put meat and water in it, then drop red-hot pebbles on the meat. When the pebbles cooled, they would pick them out and drop in another lot of freshly heated ones. Cooking might have been a lengthy process, but in a day's time they could prepare enough stew for two days.

Ahmad and Pakya marked the passage of days with jots on the rocky walls of their cave. They had been there exactly a year, and the bitterly cold winter was almost over. By the time snow had melted, there came great joy to them—Pakya gave birth to a bonny baby. They named it Mahbat, which means Love. And indeed it was the fruit of their courageous love.

With the spring, came days that were even happier. But one morning, Ahmad and Pakya heard the sound of rifle and artillery fire. They climbed a hill to see what was happening, and through the smoke below they could make out more than a thousand cavalrymen.

"It's war! Who's fighting?" they asked each other in surprise.

The flames of war had spread to Beitk. This was the Beitk Incident which the American imperialists incited Usman to create in 1947, hoping thus to provoke a war against the Soviet Union. Ahmad knew nothing about this then. He only knew that this was the end of his peaceful life with Pakya. They made preparations to move, although by now they had only one horse left. They were in front of the cave, making up their minds how and which of their stone implements and shabby possessions to take, when they saw several Kazakh horsemen galloping down a distant slope towards them. The costumes of these horsemen told

Ahmad and Pakya that they were Usman's troops from Asan.

Panic-stricken, Ahmad and Pakya abandoned everything, except a small bundle of clothes. Then, taking their two-month-old baby and leading their only horse, they fled up the mountain. By the time they had reached the top, they were seen by the Kazakh cavalrymen, who opened fire on them. More Kazakhs joined in pursuit, aiming their shots at the horse the couple were riding. Fortunately, just when the fusillade was becoming extremely fierce, Ahmad drove the horse along a small track to the other side of the mountain, where they were hidden by towering crags.

Ahmad continued to spur the horse on, fearing lest the Kazakhs catch up with them. And true enough, they had not ridden far when shots rang out on the mountain top where a group of horsemen had appeared and were going down in pursuit.

Ahmad was galloping as fast as the horse could go, firmly holding Pakya who was clasping Mahbat tightly in her arms. Suddenly they were fired upon from both sides of the mountain, and bullets whizzed over their heads. Ahmad heard Pakya cry out and saw a crimson spot grow on her breast—the child's head had been shattered by a shot. Pakya was weeping bitterly, but he had no time for grief. Keeping a firm grip of himself, he was spurring the horse on.

Finally they outpaced their pursuers and left Beitk behind. When they reached the boundless Gobi, Pakya was still clutching the blood-stained little body of their child and weeping. They dismounted, and when Ahmad took the child, Pakya snatched it back from him like a wild animal.

"We can't take him! Even your blood-stained dress will have to be thrown away!" Ahmad urged.

There, in the vast Gobi, they dug a small grave with

their hands and buried the child, building a small mound of sand over it. Pakya sat there weeping inconsolably as if her heart would break. Ahmad stared blankly at the little mound, while the horse stood motionless, as if sharing its master's grief.

They lingered by the little grave until they again heard shots in the distance, and were forced to leave. Ahmad persuaded Pakya to take off her blood-stained dress and put on the only other garment she had brought along. Riding away, they kept turning back to gaze in the direction of the small grave which had long since disappeared from sight.

Evening overtook Ahmad and Pakya riding along undulating sand-dunes. In the distance they dimly discerned yurts and flickering lights. They decided to skirt this settlement and were about to do so when they heard thundering hoofs behind them. They turned to confront a group of Kazakhs. Ahmad was on the point of galloping off when a deafening shot rang out, and their horse fell, throwing them to the ground. The Kazakhs were immediately upon them, tied them up and threw them into a tent.

This was a settlement of Kazakhs from Muleiho County. Since the arrival of Usman kidnapping and rustling became extremely recurrent. Lately, in fact, rustling had become so rampant that young Kazakhs were detailed to guard the settlement. So when they saw Ahmad and Pakya riding one horse in the dusk and heard them speak the Asan dialect, the tribesmen were certain they were thieves.

Ahmad was given no chance to protest—in fact, he did not want to, for he thought that if they admitted being thieves it might all be to the good. Shortly afterwards they were handed over to the puppet district government in Muleiho County, and from there to

Chitai, where they were imprisoned pending their trial. In prison both of them were chained.

This was Ahmad's first experience of real prison life. Although he had been imprisoned by Usman at Asan, he managed to escape after a few days. Now, it was something new. He had never seen such a dark room. Inside was a wooden cage and the only air came through the small apertures of the iron door. His heart sank. He was manacled and fettered, and this was a new, horrible experience. Moreover, every evening he was put into "iron trousers."[1] Ahmad felt like a wild horse, that had been accustomed to galloping at will in the wilderness, suddenly captured and trussed up. Several times he exerted all his strength in an almost superhuman effort to break his chains, but all in vain.

After several hearings he was sentenced to hard labour. He felt slightly less trammelled than before and fervently hoped he would be put on a job outside. This wish eventually came true, and he escaped the very first day he went out with a labour gang.

Ahmad headed northeast. On the way he met a friendly tribesman who gave him a horse and some food, and thus helped him make good his escape. Ahmad hastened to the border of the Mongolian People's Republic and finally reached Chenhsi, but there he was arrested by the Kuomintang police on a charge of espionage and sent to prison in Hami. Again he found himself in gaol, and this time he stayed in until the liberation of Sinkiang. After the establishment of a people's government his case was reviewed with others and he was released—two months before Pakya.

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1 Something peculiar to Sinkiang. These trousers were made of iron and clamped round the knees, with a rod passed through behind, so that when this was locked a prisoner could neither sit nor lie down.

He came out just when Usman was staging the Barkul revolt, and heard that the Hawen League magistrate of the Chingil River and his son, who had stolen Pakya, were involved. Ahmad volunteered to guide the People's Liberation Army units which had been ordered to annihilate the bandits. Though badly missing Pakya every minute of the day, he well knew that if they were to live happily they must first wipe out the bandits who had nearly destroyed their happiness.

Luck favoured Ahmad: the bandit-suppression troops with which he was serving as a guide entered the outskirts of Chitai, and he asked for a leave of absence to enquire at the people's government about Pakya's whereabouts. When they told him, he was overjoyed. Leaping on his horse, he sped like wind to the tribe where she was living then.

Ahmad and Pakya's story amazed the tribesmen and they marvelled at the young couple's courage. There and then they killed a sheep and organized a feast for them, with singing and dancing. When evening fell, they asked Ahmad to stay with Pakya, but he refused, explaining that he had asked only for a day's leave and had to return to his unit.

After the bandits had been wiped out, Ahmad returned to Pakya. That same day they learned to their surprise that their own Moregh tribe had moved to this district. Pakya was reunited with her father and mother and her younger brother, who had since grown up. Ahmad, however, was unable to find his parents, and when he asked the tribesmen they shook their heads in reply.

Using tricks and threats, Usman had persuaded the Moregh tribesmen to side with him in the revolt. Now liberation had come to them too. Their numbers, however, were sadly depleted, and practically all their live-

stock was lost. Pakya's father, for instance, formerly a comparatively well-to-do cattle owner, had all his cattle stolen by Usman. But for the relief given by the People's Liberation Army and the people's government, most of the tribesmen would have starved to death. Ahmad learned that his parents had long been killed by the league magistrate. At this news he burst into tears, but when he learned that both the magistrate and his son had been killed by the Liberation Army during the bandit-suppression campaign, he felt himself avenged.

When the comrades of the work team that had come to the grasslands to help the returning tribesmen settle down heard Ahmad and Pakya's story, they used them as an example to publicize the Marriage Law, and decided to arrange a splendid wedding ceremony for them. The comrades explained that the feudal marriage system with its compulsory match-making, its contempt for women and its neglect of children's rights, was to be overthrown. Henceforth, marriage was to be free.

When Ahmad and Pakya heard this, they were moved to tears. This was what they had been longing for all these years. They could not help sighing as they said:

"If only the Communists had come a few years earlier, how happy we would have been!"

The publicity given the Marriage Law and the praise showered on Ahmad and Pakya for their opposition to the feudal marriage system were immediately acclaimed by most Kazakhs, particularly by the young people and those who had suffered most under the feudal marriage system.

Even Pakya's old father, pigheaded though he was, applauded in approval. He came to approve it after a long struggle with himself, for previously he regarded Kazakh marriage customs as something sacred, as an unassailable tradition handed down by his ancestors.

He had considered himself disgraced by Pakya's action, and had prayed to Huta, asking the god not to punish him and his wife for their child's deeds. Today, having heard the new arguments and thought of the troubles he had endured and of all that his daughter had suffered, he realized that the so-called sacred, unassailable traditions constantly invoked by the tribal chiefs had toppled down. He recalled his own youth, how he had fallen in love with a girl, how both of them had suffered —like Ahmad and Pakya—and how, lacking Ahmad and Pakya's courage, he had submitted to the customs and rules which he then in his heart thought unreasonable. These thoughts helped him better to understand Ahmad and Pakya, and he loved them all the more for having done what he as a young man wanted to do but dared not. In the past this would have been considered a crime. Today, it was held praiseworthy.

So, far from feeling ashamed for his daughter, he felt that she was a credit to him. Ashamed of the way he had treated Pakya in the past, he called her to him and said:

"My child, I have been wronging you!" Then he broke down and clasped her close to his heart.

The scene was interrupted by her mother, who bustled over and indignantly tugged her daughter away.

"She's no daughter of yours, you pigheaded old creature!" The old woman had never dared address her husband like this before, but today she no longer feared him. She felt that she had the upper hand, knew that her husband was in the wrong and was resolved to take him down a peg or two. The old man did not even look angry, he just hung his head and remained silent. Pakya reasoned with her mother and comforted her father, conscious for the first time in her life of family affection.

The work team and many tribesmen spent a whole

day preparing for Ahmad and Pakya's wedding. The event was celebrated magnificently and gaily. The five-star flag floated over the yurt and Chairman Mao's portrait was hung inside. Instead of a wedding feast confined to specially invited guests, it turned out to be a mass meeting. Apart from these innovations, the celebration was virtually unchanged: there were the usual horse races, lasso-throwing competitions, wrestling contests, music and singing.

Unfeigned happiness welled up in the hearts of all present. They realized that this was not just the wedding of one young couple, but that joy had come to all Kazakh tribesmen. Kazakh men and women were getting new customs, morals and laws. The sight of the flag, Chairman Mao's portrait and the faces of the newlyweds, blushing with embarrassment yet beaming with happiness, strengthened this impression. Only they still did not know how to put this new feeling into words.

But that evening, when the wedding ceremony was over and the singing had started, Ahmad sang a song he had composed himself. This song joyfully expressed all that was in the hearts of the tribesmen. In a stirring voice Ahmad sang:

My face is deeply lined,
I've grown a bushy beard.
You ask me, how old I am?
I'll answer: Just a year.
The five and twenty years I'd lived
Before this—well, you see,
I'd lived far worse than does a dog:
I suffered woe and misery.
So count my age then from the day
I was at last set free.

We, Kazakh men and women,
By many rules were bound.
'Twas said 'tis law, morality,
But nothing good in them I found.
They stole the woman that I loved
And plunged me deep in woe.
We had no good rules in the past,
We had no honest law.
Today, the one I love is free,
Today, there's a law, and to me
It's sweeter than honey could ever be.
What is this law? You want to know?
I'll tell you—it's the Marriage Law!

Today's a birthday for me,
I have a Father who's dearer than life.
Today, the one who'd been stolen from me
Is back with me as wife.
And for the Marriage Law sincerely
I'd like to thank right now
The Communist Party that we love
And our Chairman Mao.
May long they live! May long they thrive
To keep the flame of freedom alive!

June 1952

I Want to Study!

by Kao Yu-pao

Kao Yu-pao was born in 1927 in Fuhsien County, Liaotung Province. Son of a poor-peasant family, he had to help with household chores and other work from early childhood. He went to school at the age of nine, but had to leave again after only one month, to tend the landlord's pigs. From ten to sixteen, he worked at various odd jobs. When he was seventeen, he was seized by the Japanese then in control of Northeast China and forced to do hard labour for them. He did not return home until after the Japanese surrender in 1945. During the following year, he learned the carpenter's craft.

The next winter, he joined the People's Liberation Army and served successively as messenger, guard, and mail delivery and dispatch clerk. He also took part in several of the major campaigns.

While still struggling to overcome his illiteracy, Kao Yu-pao began writing his autobiographical novel, putting marks of his own invention in place of the ideographs he could not yet write. Since 1951, he has been studying creative writing at one of the P.L.A.'s cultural organizations.

One fine March day, Yu-pao was going with eight or nine poor boys from his village to gather firewood on the hills; each carried a sickle and some rope. Outside the village, they saw the village school pupils marching along the road, with one pupil walking beside their column shouting, "One...one, two, one..." like a drill sergeant. The old village school-teacher brought up the rear.

Yu-pao watched them intently, full of envy. Then he turned to his friends: "They are on an outing while we're going for firewood. But still we can march in a

column as they do. Fall in!" None of the poor boys objected. Yu-pao stuck his sickle in his belt, brought his friends into line and walked beside them, shouting also, "One...one, two, one...." The poor boys marched in step with good spirit, holding themselves very straight, their sickles over their shoulders. Thus they followed the school children at a distance.

The village school pupils heard them, and one by one turned around to see who were behind, thus getting out of step. The old teacher also turned around to look and was very astonished. Who was this boy who was able to draw up so many high-spirited boys in order?

He waved his hand and called: "Hello, young fellow! Come here a moment!"

Seeing the old schoolmaster wanted to speak to Yu-pao, Yu Chih-cheng who had acted as drill sergeant said: "I'll go fetch him for you, teacher."

When Yu-pao noticed that the teacher wanted to speak to him, he shouted to his group: "Halt!" Then he said: "Attention! The teacher is calling me over. You play here a while and wait for me. We shall go on to gather firewood when I come back. Dismiss!"

But one of the boys said: "Don't go, Yu-pao! The teacher may beat you!"

"What do I have to be afraid of?" Yu-pao said, "I'll go, see and be back in a moment."

Here, Yu Chih-cheng ran up, took Yu-pao by the hand and said: "Come with me, Yu-pao! Our teacher wants you. He is very kind. Come on the outing with us!"

"I can't. I have to go for firewood."

"Come with us! You can gather firewood later."

"They are waiting for me." But Yu-pao turned and said to the boys in his group: "Just wait a little while! I'll be back right away."

Yu-pao went over to the old school-teacher and

bowed respectfully. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the old man was quite tall, between fifty and sixty years old. A neat moustache jutted out evenly on both sides of his nose. He wore a gown of coarse blue cotton and the black cloth shoes on his feet were well-worn. His whole face was smiling. . . . Yu-pao was thinking: "Perhaps the teacher really wants me to go on the outing with them, but there's no firewood at home. . . ."

The pupils did not know what to make of it all. So they just crowded round to watch.

The old teacher bent over, patted Yu-pao on the head and said with a smile: "Hoho, you are well-mannered, I see! How old are you?"

"I'm twelve, teacher."

"And what's your name?"

Yu-pao cocked his head to one side, smiled too and said, "See whether you can guess!"

"I know his name, teacher," interrupted Yu Chih-cheng. "We often play together."

But Yu-pao hastily put his hand over his friend's mouth and said: "You mustn't tell!"

The old teacher found this rather amusing, so he smiled again and said: "You quaint child, how can I guess?"

"You really can't guess? Look!" And Yu-pao squatted down on his heels and traced the characters *Yu-pao* in the dust with his finger. The two characters did not look like anything at all. The old teacher squinted at them, hands on his knees, and bent over to see better. Only after a long time was he able to make them out. But he smiled and said: "Quite gifted, quite gifted! And what's your surname?"

Yu Chih-cheng blurted it out: "I know his surname is Kao."

Yu-pao threw the little drill sergeant an angry glance, annoyed that he should have spoken too soon.

"And what's your father's name?" the teacher asked again.

Yu-pao smiled. But before he could say anything, that Yu Chih-cheng answered for him again. "His father is Kao Hsueh-tien. They live in our village."

"Ho, so this is Kao Hsueh-tien's child—such a big boy already!" Then the old teacher said to Yu-pao: "Now let me give you two characters to read—see if you recognize them!"

He also squatted on his haunches and traced the characters *taiping* (peace) on the ground with his middle finger and said: "Look! What do these two stand for?"

Yu-pao, his little eyes staring hard, thought and thought. These two characters looked so very familiar. Where had he seen them before? Suddenly he remembered: Weren't they the same as the first two characters on the big board outside the Taiping Village administration office? So he answered: "These are the characters *taiping,* as in the name of our village."

The old teacher shook his head and hand, saying: "That's not correct. There is no peace now in Peace Village. These are the two characters for 'peace' as in 'peace to the world.' Do you understand that?"

Yu-pao blushed as he stubbornly replied: "But the characters are the same!"

"The characters are the same," the old teacher said. "But the meaning is not the same. You child can't understand that yet. . . . But look, what character is this?"

The old teacher wrote the character *chuan* (犬 meaning "dog") on the ground.

"The old teacher must have made a mistake," thought Yu-pao and wiped out the dot in the upper

right corner of the character. Then he said: "Isn't this *ta* (大 meaning "big") ? There isn't any dot on this character. You made a mistake!"

At this, the old teacher and all his pupils burst into loud guffaws.

"Have you learned to read and write, child?"

"No."

"Would you like to go to school?"

"Who wouldn't like to go to school? It is good to be able to read. My father says that people who haven't learned to read will be abused by others. To go to school, to learn to read, to go on outings, to have drill, to listen to story-telling and to play games....How wonderful that must be!"

"Then why don't you go to school?"

"My father and mother won't let me go."

"Why don't they let you go?"

"I. . . ." Sadness welled up in Yu-pao's heart. He lowered his head. Much that had happened came to his mind and tears stood in his eyes. "I...I...don't know."

And before he had finished, he turned around, squeezed his way out of the crowd of school children and ran towards the group of poor boys. The old teacher called after him. Yu Chih-cheng tried to stop him. But he wouldn't even look back.

To go to school was Yu-pao's burning desire. Many times he had pleaded and argued with his parents. One day in early spring, he had gone to get his playmate Yu Chih-cheng to go with him to gather firewood on the hill side. To his surprise he met Yu Chih-cheng and several other boys of the village in primary school pupils' uniforms, with satchels over their shoulders, hopping and skipping on their way to school. When Yu Chih-cheng saw Yu-pao, he called: "Why don't you

come to school with us, Yu-pao? Look at my nice school-bag!"

"Aren't you going to gather firewood?"

"I shall do that after school. Go and ask your father to let you go to school with us!"

Yu-pao rushed home, took his mother's hand excitedly and said: "I want to go to school, mother!"

But his mother said: "Dear child, look around you in your home... 'in day-time, no grain to call the chicks to feed; at night, the rats even won't find anything to eat!' Two days out of three we go hungry, how can we think of sending you to school?"

But Yu-pao would not listen to her. His father was sick in bed with a wound on his leg that had become purulent. Now he turned over on his side to scold Yu-pao: "The older you grow, the more stupid you become! You want to go to school! What shall we eat at home? Do you think we can live on the cold northwest wind? Go now to gather firewood!"

"I won't go!"

"I'll beat you to death if you don't go!" His father tried to get up. But the sore on his leg gave him such pain that he fell back on the bed, gritting his teeth.

Yu-pao's mother pulled her son to her, put her arms around him and said with a sigh, leaning her cheek against his: "Listen to me, child! You are old enough to go to school. Your father and mother don't have the heart to keep you from going. Your father has had a hard time of it all his life and he hopes, of course, that you'll be worthy of our family and bring an end to our suffering. But, child, just now we are in very great difficulties. We can't even afford to have the sore on your father's leg treated! As long as heaven is blind to our troubles, you must not think of going to school. If you don't go to gather firewood, we won't even have a fire to cook on!"

Yu-pao still begged: "But I can gather firewood as soon as school is out every day! There'll be plenty of kindling...."

"But, child, we cannot raise the money to pay for your schooling!"

"I want to go to school!"

His father said: "You just dare! See whether I won't break your legs."

Yu-pao was aroused. He threw the sickle and rope he was carrying to the ground and pouted: "Even if you don't let me go, I'll go!"

He turned and ran out of the house. His mother was very upset. She followed him, calling again and again: "Yu-pao, child, where are you off to?"

But Yu-pao did not listen to her calling him. He ran through a lane and made for Mt. Taiping. On the way, he came to the bank of the small, quick-flowing stream. There was no bridge, not even a stepping-stone. To get across, people had to take off their shoes and wade through. Just as Yu-pao had taken off his shoes, he heard a heavy thud. Turning, he saw his mother had stumbled over a stone and fallen. He was so frightened that he ran back to her, without even putting on his shoes, to help her sit up. Then, with his head on her breast, he burst into tears. His mother rocked him in her arms and wept with him, her hot tears streaming over his face. Mother and son sat like this for a long time.

When they had cried their hearts out, his mother said bitterly: "It isn't that your father and mother don't love you. But the *pao*[1] chief has asked us many times already for our contribution to the village fund

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1 Under the Kuomintang regime and the Japanese occupation, village households were grouped in *pao*, the members of which were held mutually responsible.

with which he'll buy rifles. You know that, don't you? And for the sore on your father's leg and his heart trouble there isn't any money to get treatment. . . . Oh heaven! How are we going to live?" Her grief caused her tears to flow anew.

Yu-pao felt as if his mother's tears were burning him. His arms around her neck, he, too, wept bitterly. Then he said, with sobs: "Mother, I don't...want to go to school! Let's...go...home...."

From then on Yu-pao did not even dare to think again about going to school.

Yu-pao's mother came into the yard with a basketful of radish leaves and told her daughter Yu-jung to wash them at the well. Then she went back into the house to change the dressing on Yu-pao's father's sore. When she had just untied the bandage, she heard someone calling in the yard:

"Is Kao Hsueh-tien home?"

The voice was unfamiliar to her. She looked out and saw it was Mr. Chou, the old teacher of the village school. She hurried out to greet him and ask him in. Her husband, the untied bandage dangling from his leg, also tried to get up. But Mr. Chou stopped him, saying: "Don't get up! I'm not a stranger. Mind your sore leg!"

Kao Hsueh-tien then filled a pipe and handed it to the teacher. Mr. Chou looked at Kao's leg and said: "No wonder I haven't seen you around for quite some time! How did you get this sore?"

Kao Hsueh-tien gave a deep sigh as he told Mr. Chou how, at the end of the previous year, the *pao* chief had fiendishly set a dog on him when he went to check on the payments due him for work.

Mr. Chou sighed several times during this narrative. When Kao had finished, Mr. Chou said: "What

brutality! What kind of a world are we living in? As you have to 'crouch low under other people's eaves,' can you do anything but what they tell you to do? Only when there is real peace will all be well."

"Will there ever be such a day? Mr. Chou, will we live to see such a day? Or will there be nothing left of us but bleached bones when that day arrives?"

"Most certainly there will be such a day! Let's be patient. You are not old yet, you'll live to see it. I won't, I have one foot in the grave."

For a while, they went on talking about their daily lives. Then Mr. Chou raised the question of Yu-pao's education:

"Brother Kao, I came to see you for no other reason but this: Your Yu-pao is a clever child, very promising! I'm not saying this to please you. It's difficult to find another one like him among any ten children. You mustn't delay his schooling!"

But Kao Hsueh-tien replied, with a deep sigh: "Aya, Mr. Chou, just look around, I know you won't laugh at us, in our home we don't even have enough for this," and he made a gesture of putting food into his own mouth. "Where would we take the money from, to pay for his schooling? If there were even the shred of a hope of earning a decent living, I would have sent him to school long ago. But really, we are like fish and shrimps on dry ground—done for in the wink of an eyelid!"

Yu-pao's mother added: "Mr. Chou, it is really very kind of you to come here especially for the boy's sake. Is there any parent who doesn't want his child to have a future? We can't blame a thousand or a myriad things, we just have to blame our own bad luck that has made us useless as parents. We can't feed our own mouths, how can we send the child to school!"

Her heart was so heavy that she could hardly check her tears.

Old Mr. Chou looked about him in the room, at the few sticks of furniture: A mat so worn that it was nearly in pieces and two ragged coverlets on the earthen *kang*,[1] one table with only three legs by the wall, a water jar mended and still one piece missing, two small benches that gave whenever one sat on them. A few broken jugs and pots, a pile of kindling before the kitchen stove—this was the total of their possessions; nothing of value among them. And the clothes the Kaos had on—patch upon patch, and still their elbows and knees were showing.

Mr. Chou said: "Don't be depressed! It isn't your fault that you are poor. Who isn't yearning for a better life? After all, you are not the only poor family. If I could make myself ten years younger and a little bit stronger, I wouldn't be in such a poor job. This is not teaching, but suffering humiliation! You know very well, whenever his betters so much as belch, the *pao* chief regards it an imperial mandate; and whenever the *pao* chief himself belches, we must accept the consequences without a murmur, whether it means life or death! He has decided I must study Japanese now and teach it later. Eh, we Chinese are Chinese, why should Chinese children learn the Japanese devils' language? Ah, don't let's talk about that any more. I didn't come here to make money. At my age, every day I live is just another day gone. It won't exhaust me to teach a few pupils more, and it won't give me much leisure to teach a few less. Let your Yu-pao come to see me tomorrow. I won't take any money from you, anyway. Paper, ink and pen as well as books I have, you needn't pay for any

[1] See footnote 2 on page 4.

of them. School is over early in the afternoon, so the child can still gather firewood for you."

Kao Hsueh-tien looked at his wife, and his wife looked at him. They had often heard people say that Mr. Chou of the Taiping Village school was a good man. Now they saw that this was true. No wonder many poor children could also go to school under Mr. Chou! Their heartfelt gratitude made them speechless. After a while, Kao Hsueh-tien managed to say: "Thank you for your kindness! But this boy is unruly and fond of fighting. He'll give you a lot of trouble!"

Yu-pao's mother also said: "That's true, he really is a wild boy, not fit for anything! I'm afraid you'll waste your efforts on him."

Mr. Chou stood up, handed the pipe back to Kao Hsueh-tien, smiled and said: "You say this boy is unruly. I think it's better for children of poor families to be unruly, then they won't be bullied so much! Brother Kao, forgive me for being so frank with you—you are too meek, that's why you're always at the losing end. Now no more about it. . . . Tomorrow you'll let your boy come to school."

All that morning Yu-pao had been upset. He gathered less kindling than usual and felt as if he had lost something. When he came home into the yard, he put down the kindling he had gathered and did not know what to do next.

Suddenly his sister Yu-jung came running out of the house. Jumping around, she said laughingly: "Yu-pao, come here quickly, I'll tell you something—you are going to school tomorrow!"

Yu-pao didn't believe her. "You are fooling me, sister!"

"Fooling you? What for? Go and ask father! Who's fooling you!"

Yu-pao rushed into the house and threw down his sickle and rope. His mother was ladling food from the pot for his father on the *kang*. Yu-pao jumped onto the *kang*, put his arms around his mother's neck and asked: "Mother, is it true that you'll let me go to school?"

In his excitement, he knocked some food from the bowl in his mother's hand. She was annoyed.

"It's true, of course it's true! But eat your food now. Is this the way for a pupil to behave?"

"You're fooling me. I can't believe it. . . ."

"Would your mother fool you? Eat your meal quickly, it's getting cold!"

Yu-pao let go of his mother and crawled up on the *kang* to where his father lay and asked: "Father, really, you'll let me go to school?"

"Your mother will take you tomorrow. But you mustn't be naughty or get into fights."

Yu-pao was overjoyed, still only half-believing, half-doubting his good fortune. After he had finished eating, he pulled his sister into the yard and insisted she tell him why his father and mother had suddenly, from one day to the next, decided to send him to school. Yu-jung told him then the long and the short of the morning's events: how Mr. Chou had come to their place and what had been said, in all detail. Then only was Yu-pao convinced. In the afternoon, when he picked up his sickle and rope to go and gather firewood in the hills, he skipped and jumped all the way, so that the chickens flew up onto the roofs in their fright and the dogs fled in all directions. So there would be enough kindling at home, he gathered many twigs and sticks and even climbed up the trees to cut off some dead branches. He also found a dozen magpie eggs in some nests in the trees.

At night, Yu-pao could not sleep in his excitement.

His badly worn clothes seemed unbecoming for a scholar, so his mother had started mending them in the afternoon. She made an old blue gown which had the least holes in it over into a pupil's uniform. As there wasn't enough material, she had to use two pieces of black cloth for the pockets. In the evening, she filled the lamp with the little bit of bean oil she had skimped from her cooking and lighted it to mend Yu-pao's trousers. The slender wick gave off a dim light so that Yu-pao's mother had difficulty to thread her needle. But, even so, the room appeared dazzlingly bright compared with its usual gloom. Yu-pao's shoes had to be mended too, his heels and toes were showing through—this, too, would not do for a school pupil. By midnight, she had finished all these jobs; she blew out the lamp and lay down on the *kang*. But shortly she thought of something else. So she got up and relit the lamp. She rummaged for some pieces of cloth and made them into a satchel for Yu-pao.

Yu-pao urged his mother several times, "Mother, go to sleep now!" But each time his mother replied: "You sleep, my boy!"

After a while, Yu-pao got up too, climbed up and looked out at the sky through a tear in the paper over the window. It was pitch dark in the yard, so he could not see a thing. Only the stars were twinkling above. He lay down for another while, got up again and asked:

"Is it daylight now, mother? Please make me something to eat. I don't want to be late for school."

He hated the daylight for not appearing much sooner. In this mood, he lay down to sleep and got up again, got up and lay down again several times. Towards morning his mother succeeded finally in calming him down and making him sleep. He slept soundly for he did not know how long. Then, still half-asleep, he thought he heard someone call him.

He quickly opened his eyes and found his mother was calling: "Yu-pao, get up and eat!" He saw it was already daylight. He jumped off the *kang* and rushed, barefoot, out of the door.

His mother called after him: "Where are you going, Yu-pao? Eat first!"

"I won't eat. I'm going to school!"

"Don't you need any food, simply because you're going to school?"

"Why didn't you wake me up earlier, why?"

"You won't be late. Look, the sun has just risen, it is still early morning."

Certainly, the sun was still lingering over the eaves of the house opposite their own.

Yu-pao's mother washed his face very, very clean; then, making him dip his hands into the earthen basin, she washed them and his arms very, very clean too. When he had eaten, she helped him put on his uniform and mended shoes, and the satchel over his shoulder. Then she straightened his clothes, put two small vegetable dumplings into his satchel and said: "Let's go! Mother will take you."

His father said behind them, as they were leaving: "Remember, Yu-pao! Watch your hide if you don't obey the teacher!"

Without turning around, Yu-pao answered: "I'll remember." His mother took him by the hand and, together, they walked along happily. To those who greeted her, she said: "Yes, I'm taking my child to school. I'd rather eat a few mouthfuls less than spoil his future!"

On their way, mother and son passed a big courtyard, where some peach-trees and apricot-trees were blossoming. How beautiful they were! Further on, they found that stepping-stones had been placed across the stream so that people no longer had to take off their

shoes. Beyond the stream, they came to a grove. The leaves on the trees were already out. The rays of the sun fell on the grass in the grove and made the dewdrops on the blades sparkle, dazzling the eye. Little birds were hopping about on the branches, singing. Yu-pao's mother kept on admonishing him while they were walking along how he must obey the teacher. To each admonition Yu-pao gave the answer, "I know."

When they were out of the grove, Yu-pao lifted his face and asked: "Mother, when I've finished school, what shall I be?"

"What you'll be? A good man! Learn to feed yourself, that'll prove you're a man! You mustn't be like your father—a meekling, bullied by others all his life!"

"Mother, when I'm grown up, I'll take a big stick to anybody who dares bully me!"

"Hm, it wouldn't be a crime, really, to beat some of those people to death! But can you, single-handed, fight them all? They have money and power—wouldn't they send you to jail? Now, remember whatever happens, you mustn't cause any trouble and make your parents worry about you!"

"Chih-cheng and the others can help me. I'm not afraid!"

"You see, you see, how you carry on again! There must be no fighting in school! What has your father just told you? Have you forgotten already?"

"Didn't you say some of them deserved a beating?"

"If they deserve a beating, it's not for you to administer it! You just learn properly and you'll make your mother happy. . . ."

The village school was located in a dilapidated old temple on the slope of a mountain. The temple was about a hundred years old. Nobody knew where the monks had gone to. The idols had fallen down. Only

three rooms remained standing. In the spring, when there wasn't too much work in the fields, a few enthusiastic peasants had helped repair these rooms and invited old Mr. Chou, who was single, to set up a private school, so to speak, with two rooms for classrooms and one room for old Teacher Chou as living quarters. But when the *pao* chief, by the name of Chou Chang-an, heard about this matter, he immediately decided he had to have a hand in it. So he said that, if they wanted a school, it should be a primary school for the whole village, and he insisted that Mr. Chou should later also teach Japanese. Thus it was that the school was named the "Taiping Village Primary School."

When Yu-pao and his mother came to the school, none of the pupils had arrived yet. Mr. Chou was very glad to see Yu-pao. Yu-pao's mother said to Mr. Chou over and over again: "This child is very young and naughty. He doesn't know anything, he's fond of fighting. He doesn't do as he is told, he's so stubborn and wild! If he doesn't obey you, please thrash him for me!"

But Mr. Chou said: "Don't worry, Sister Kao! Leave the boy to me. A good drum you needn't strike heavily. From what I see in him now, I can tell he won't go wrong!"

Seeing the pupils arrive one after the other, Yu-pao's mother then left. Mr. Chou went into his room and brought out three books, one small notebook and a pencil. He called Yu-pao and said: "Take these, my boy. But listen! Studying is not the same as gathering firewood. You must pay attention when I explain the lesson. Also, in studying there are rules to obey. You must not quarrel or fight. And you must ask questions when there are things you don't understand."

Yu-pao again replied: "I know." Mr. Chou pointed at a little red-lacquered desk in the front row and gave him a small bench, saying: "You sit here."

Then the teacher walked away. Yu-pao put the bench behind the red-lacquered desk and was going to sit down. But suddenly there was nothing under him —where had the bench gone to? Yu-pao sat down on the ground with a bump, then sprawled on his back. Some of the pupils burst into loud laughter. Yu-pao jumped up and saw that the *pao* chief's son, nicknamed "Little Mischief," had removed the bench from under him. Arms akimbo, Little Mischief pointed at Yu-pao and abused him fiercely: "Get away, you little beggar, don't dirty our desks!"

Yu-pao flew into a rage; he raised his little fist, squared himself to fight and said: "Little Mischief, mind your big blockhead or I'll bash it in for you!"

The pupils immediately divided into two groups. All the poor boys sided with Yu-pao and blamed Little Mischief for turning over Yu-pao's bench. Some of the boys sided with Little Mischief and laughed at Yu-pao's shabby, patched clothes. Several of the little fiends jumped on their benches and shouted: "Fight, fight! Who strikes the first blow is the master!" But Yu Chih-cheng jumped quickly between Yu-pao and Little Mischief and shouted at the latter: "You mustn't fight!"

Mr. Chou heard the noise they were making and hurried into the classroom. Immediately each pupil sat down in his own place very quietly. Yu Chih-cheng took Yu-pao by the hand and stood with him before the teacher's platform. He said to the teacher: "Teacher, please, let Yu-pao sit at my desk!" Then he reported how Little Mischief had knocked the bench from under Yu-pao.

Mr. Chou asked: "Little Mischief, why did you knock Yu-pao's bench over?" Little Mischief replied: "This desk was bought for me by my father. I don't

want this beggar child sitting at it!" Mr. Chou said: "Child, does it really matter if he sits at your desk?" "I won't let him!" said Little Mischief.

Yu-pao then said: "Teacher, I won't sit at his desk. Please let me sit with Chih-cheng!"

Mr. Chou said: "All right, go and sit with Chih-cheng, then." Checking his anger, he turned to Little Mischief: "I'll let you off this time. But you better think over what you've done. Is it right to bully people?" Then, exhorting them all once more to behave, he began to explain the day's lesson.

Yu-pao had just been going to school for a month and a few days and had had to swallow his pride nobody knows how many times. At first, during lunch-time Little Mischief had been eating the white-flour steamed bread and boiled eggs the family sent him every day, while Yu-pao and the poor boys had only dumplings filled with wild herbs which they brought along to school. Little Mischief would smack his lips and admiringly shake his head, exclaiming: "How good this tastes!" But later on, Yu-pao and the group of poor boys would climb up trees and take magpie eggs from the nests, boil them and bring them to school to eat. These eggs tasted good and were lots of fun to gather. It annoyed Little Mischief and his group to see the others eat the magpie eggs so much that they stopped showing off their better food. Yu-pao was very obedient to the teacher. He was diligent and industrious. Together with Chih-cheng, he helped the old teacher light the fire and fetch water. He learned new words quickly and had a good memory. Except for Little Mischief and his band, all the pupils liked to play with him. Whenever Little Mischief tried to bully him, Yu-pao just thought: "I'm not like you. You may lord it over us here in school. I can ignore you. But if you really

dare, let's go outside and see who is the stronger of us two!"

Little Mischief and the other rich boys, on the other hand, agreed secretly: "If we fight in school, the teacher will scold us. Let's go outside and wait till we get him alone, then we beat him into pulp!"

Yu Chih-cheng was the leader of the boys on their way home from school, so he was always with Yu-pao and Little Mischief's band did not dare raise their hands. But one day Yu-pao happened to go home alone. When Little Mischief noticed it, he signalled to his band. Six or seven boys from rich families took a short cut and hid themselves in the grove near the little stream. They waited for Yu-pao to approach, then jumped on him suddenly and, brandishing sticks and twigs, barred his way.

Little Mischief yelled at him: "Stop, Yu-pao! Bring magpie eggs from the nests in the trees for us and we'll let you go! If not, we'll beat you up!"

It was late in March, the season when the magpies were laying their eggs. Usually, when poor boys asked Yu-pao to climb a tree and get magpie eggs for them, he would do so at once. But now, since Little Mischief and his band were trying to bully him, he refused, as a matter of course. He looked at Little Mischief with contempt in his eyes and turned to go. The other boys glared at him and shouted: "We dare you to go!" In a flash, they had surrounded Yu-pao and were threatening him: "Get twenty eggs for each of us, then we'll let you go home!"

Yu-pao replied: "Twenty? You can whistle for that many! I'm not getting a single one for you!"

Little Mischief took hold of Yu-pao and said: "If you don't we'll thrash you!"

Yu-pao glowered at Little Mischief and raised his

fist. "Look how hard it is! Hit me if you have the pluck!" he said angrily.

Little Mischief shouted: "Beat him!" and all the boys attacked Yu-pao at once. Yu-pao was outnumbered and soon thrown to the ground. But he got an idea and freed himself with a violent jerk; he jumped to his feet and grabbed hold of Little Mischief by the collar. "Let's see which is more solid—your head or my fist!" With these words, Yu-pao crashed his fist several times —bang, bang!—against the bully's head. Little Mischief let the stick drop, as he covered his head with both hands and began to wail aloud. Yu-pao picked up the stick and fought the band with it. But they were too many against him and several times he was badly hit. He was about to lose the fight, when Yu Chih-cheng ran up with a dozen poor boys. Yu Chih-cheng shouted as he came running: "The teacher forbids fighting! Why do you bully him?"

Little Mischief, seeing that things were going badly, shouted to his gang: "Let's run!" and all of them scampered like rabbits into the grove and disappeared.

Yu-pao's hands and face were black and blue. His uniform was torn. But he did not cry. All the poor boys were furious to learn how Little Mischief and his band had tried to force Yu-pao to get magpie eggs for them.

They said: "Get eggs for them? That won't do! Don't be afraid, Yu-pao! We have more boys on our side. We'll settle accounts with them in a few days!"

"Quite right!" said Yu Chih-cheng, "we'll settle their hash! They have gone too far. Even the teacher cannot control them. We'll deal with them ourselves!"

"Hey!" one boy said, "Look at the magpies flying around these trees. There must be eggs in the nests. Let's climb up and get a few!"

Yu Chih-cheng said, "Right, let's climb up, Yu-pao!"

But a sudden gust of wind from the northwest startled them. A huge black cloud, like a monstrous cat, darkened the sky.

"That's bad!" said Yu-pao, "It's going to rain. Let's hurry home! We'll get the eggs when the weather is fine again."

They scattered and ran home. The moment Yu-pao entered the yard of his home, he heard his mother wailing.

"Oh, my poor, unlucky boy! How can mother bear to part with you? How can I watch my own child being pushed into the fire? I can't do it!"

Yu-pao was stunned. He stood in the yard and listened. His younger brother was crying and so was his elder sister Yu-jung. Suddenly he heard his father's voice, cursing:

"Cry, cry, cry! I'm not dead yet, but you want to kill me with your crying!"

Yu-pao heard his mother saying again: "I won't do it! You don't feel for your own boy! I've never seen a hard-hearted man like you!" "What do you expect me to do?" shouted his father angrily. "What else can I do? You must let him have Yu-pao. There's nothing else to be done!"

Panic-stricken, Yu-pao felt all the strength leaving his body. "Has my father sold me to somebody?" he asked himself. He rushed into the house, seized his mother by her arms and looked up into her face. She crushed him to her bosom. After a while, holding up his face, she saw the bruises on it and began to weep again, uncontrollably, till late in the evening the neighbours calmed her down with great difficulty.

The *pao* chief Chou Chang-an had a daughter about twelve years old, named Ying-tse. She was going to Dairen to attend a Japanese school. In order to raise money for her expenses, Chou Chang-an had gone around

the village that morning with two policemen to demand the money they were supposed to have contributed early that spring for the purchase of rifles. According to the *pao* chief, he had already paid the ten dollars which Yu-pao's father was supposed to contribute out of his own pocket. Since then, Chou Chang-an had come at least a dozen times to ask for this money. When he came again that morning, he proposed these alternatives: either Kao Hsueh-tien would give him the money at once, plus hundred per cent interest; or Yu-pao should tend the chief's pigs. The wages would be the cancellation of the debt; besides, he would be given three *tow*[1] of grain. The *pao* chief said in this way the Kao family would actually have one mouth less to feed; he was really trying to do them a special favour. But if Kao Hsueh-tien should refuse either of these two alternatives, the *pao* chief would have him arrested and sent to the Japanese as an "ideological criminal" in collusion with the bandits for a revolt against the authorities.

Kao Hsueh-tien and his wife had implored the *pao* chief: "But we really have no money and our boy is too young!"

But Chou Chang-an had replied: "You have money to send your boy to school, haven't you? But you have no money to pay for rifles! Hm, you hope that little snake of yours will grow into a dragon, is that it? You can't even recognize my goodwill!"

Thereupon, he threatened to have Kao Hsueh-tien tied up and taken to the village authorities. Kao Hsueh-tien could do nothing but promise to send Yu-pao as a swineherd to the *pao* chief's the next morning.

When he heard he could not go on with his studies, Yu-pao cried as if his heart were breaking, unable to

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1 See footnote on page 46.

stop. He could not get any food down. Outside, it was raining and the rain grew heavier in the evening. Yu-pao threw himself into his mother's arms. He could not go to sleep. His father lay still on the *kang*, without saying a word. His mother held Yu-pao tightly, as if she were afraid he would be snatched from her. There was so much she wanted to say to him! Finally she managed to say: "My dear child, your mother is not so cruel that she would not let you go to school. That fiendish *pao* chief is a beast! Your poor father is helpless! Wait until the sore on his leg is healed, then he will earn some money and you can come back to us and go to school again."

"Mother, I won't go to the *pao* chief's! He'll beat me! I want to go to school! I want to be with you, mother!"

"Child, I'll go to see you. Your father and sister will also go to see you. You are quite big. You must listen to me! You are my own flesh and blood, child. Mother loves you!"

All that night it was raining. In the house, mother and son were moaning and sobbing together under their ragged coverlet. Yu-pao dreaded the daylight, because he would have to part with his mother. He put his arms tightly around her and pressed his cheek against hers, thinking to himself:

"Rain, please come down harder! Let there be a flood so that that fiendish *pao* chief drown." He also thought: "I wish I could grow up quickly, then I could kill the *pao* chief and Little Mischief!" With these confused thoughts, he fell asleep in the end.

In the morning, Yu-pao's mother got up and cooked the meal before she called Yu-pao. But he would not eat anything. He just cried. His schoolmates who came to fetch him went away sadly when they heard what had happened. Yu-pao cried even more bitterly

then. He put on his uniform. His mother had mended the places that had been torn the day before. She also tied some ragged clothes and a worn-out padded jacket into a bundle for him. When they were about to start, Yu-pao slung his satchel with the school books over his shoulder.

His mother asked: "Child, you'll tend the *pao* chief's pigs. Will you dare read your books?" Yu-pao answered: "These are the teacher's books. I want to give them back to him."

Yu-pao's father said then: "Take Yu-pao to the teacher and say good-bye. After all, he has taught him for some time!"

Yu-pao's mother took the boy by the hand and they walked towards the school. The rain had stopped some time ago, but the sky was still dark and cloudy. The road had become a mess of mud puddles. They passed the big courtyard again. There were no more peach and apricot blossoms now. The stream was flowing rapidly, yellow with mud. The bed of the stream could not be seen, and it was difficult to walk across the stepping-stones. Yu-pao slipped and fell when they had crossed the stream, because the grass on the bank had become slippery in the rain and mud. In the grove no birds were singing.

Yu-pao was thinking: "Where have the birds gone to? The rain must have frightened them away so that they daren't come out!"

All along the way, Yu-pao's mother had so much she wanted to tell him. "My child, living at the *pao* chief's is not the same as at home. At home, when you are ill, mother looks after you; in other people's homes, you are at their beck and call, and if anything ails you, nobody will take the trouble to look after you. You must be smart enough to take care of yourself!"

Yu-pao promised: "I shall!" Then his mother

said: "Child, you must obey the steward, so that he'll look after you. In the day-time, when you take the pigs up the mountain, be sure to get somebody to go with you; let the pigs go only where there are people. Don't go alone into the big ravine with them. In the evening, bring them back before it gets dark. There are too many wolves on the mountain."

"I know that."

"When you're away from home, don't fight with other boys! Mother's heart would be hurt if she learned you got even a scratch! Don't make me worry too much about you!"

"Don't worry, mother!"

"Child, put on more clothes when it's chilly. Don't catch cold! You'll suffer if you're ill. When your clothes are dirty or torn, take them off. I'll take them home to wash and mend when I come to see you. . . ."

Thus, Yu-pao's mother poured forth her instructions and cautions all the way so that they reached the school without realizing how they had covered the distance.

Yu-pao was thinking: "We have walked the three *li*[1] too fast today!"

Mr. Chou had already heard from the other boys that Yu-pao had to go to work as a swineherd. The old man was very upset. He asked Yu-pao and his mother into his own room. When they were seated, he could hardly hold back his tears.

"Mr. Chou!" was all Yu-pao's mother managed to say, the tears choking her. Yu-pao could not utter a word either. From his satchel he took the three books, notebook and pencil and put them on the teacher's desk with both hands, as a sign of respect.

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1 See footnote on page 1.

But Mr. Chou put them back into Yu-pao's satchel and said: "Take them with you, child! You can study them when you have time."

Yu-pao's mother suppressed her tears with great effort and said: "It was most kind of you to have taught him. When he is grown up. . . ." She could not finish her sentence.

After a while, they took leave of Mr. Chou. The old teacher walked with them down to the foot of the mountain. Then he sighed deeply and said: "Yu-pao, there isn't much I can say to you now, just this: Be all eyes and ears when you work for the *pao* chief. There is a steward named Liu Wan-chung there. He is a good man. Go to him when you are in trouble. He is always willing to help." Then, turning to Yu-pao's mother, he said: "Don't worry, Sister Kao! Steward Liu and I come from the same village. I shall speak to him about Yu-pao when I see him. He will take care of your child. You go and see him first when you get there."

Yu-pao bowed deeply to the old teacher, then they went on. When they had walked quite a distance, Yu-pao looked back. Mr. Chou was still standing there, looking after them. A gentle breeze was pulling at his faded blue cotton gown.

December 1952

Ehdun Maole[1] and Snow White

by Huo Chien

Huo Chien, now thirty-five, hails from Pingyao County, Shansi Province. He has been fond of fine arts since childhood. In 1940, working in Yenan, he simultaneously studied at the Lu Hsun Arts' Institute. Since 1945, when Japan surrendered, he has been active in the field of propaganda, fine arts and cinema.

The land reform work team was about to set out for the pasture lands where the Yellow River describes a U-bend. The members of the team had been drawn from different government departments and from the Party as well as from the People's Liberation Army units and various people's organizations. Cavalry Regiment X was familiar with the locality because it had once fought bandits over there. So some of its men had also been drawn into the work team. Among them was Chang, leader of the Second Platoon of the Third Company. While packing, they chatted about the conditions and scenery of the place they were going to. Someone said, "Though beyond the Great Wall, the place reminds one of the beautiful and rich Yangtse Valley. A land of milk and honey indeed!" "A really wonderful place!" another chimed in. "Lots of rivers and grain. Lush green pastures everywhere, herds of cattle and sheep, camels and horses. . . ." "Our Mongolian brothers," still another said, "are really nice

1 "Precious Horse" in the Mongolian language.

folks, hearty and frank, all of them." "Lots of good horses, too!" added someone else. At this point, Platoon Leader Chang seemed to have remembered something. He set about rummaging in his bag. Finally, he took out a snapshot from his notebook. He was gazing at it, lost in reverie, when one of the men suddenly exclaimed behind his back:

"Ah, a picture!"

"Who is the girl?"

This question immediately drew everyone around—it was a two-square-inch photograph of a young man and a young woman, side by side on white horses. The young man was none other than Platoon Leader Chang himself, while his companion was a beautiful Mongolian girl dressed in national costume, smiling at Chang. This created quite a stir, the men bombarding Chang with all sorts of questions.

"Where is this Mongolian girl from?"

"Somewhere along the U-bend of the Yellow River."

"Then you'll see her again this time. Let's have a drink at your wedding!" bantered one comrade.

"Don't talk nonsense!" Chang blushed, greatly embarrassed.

"Nonsense? Just look how you both smile. A happy couple! If she is not your sweetheart, then she must be a very dear friend. Otherwise, why should you two have taken a photograph together?"

"First tell us your love story! How did you fall in love?" a mischievous-looking young comrade shouted.

Chang calmly tried to explain, "Don't make such a fuss! I've got nothing to do with her. Don't let your imagination run away."

But try as he did, he could not convince the people around that he had "nothing to do" with the girl in the picture.

Finally, Chang yielded and told his "love story."

Suiyuan Province was liberated in the autumn of 1949. But the Yinshan Mountain area along the U-bend of the Yellow River was still being harassed by Kuomintang bandit gangs. They plundered the people, raped the women and impressed the able-bodied men. The people lived in perpetual fear.

At that time, Regiment X was sent there to wipe these bandits out. Since the area had just been liberated, the people's level of political consciousness was low. And the policy of Pan-Hanism pursued by the Kuomintang reactionaries in the past was the reason for the discord which still existed to a certain degree between the Han nationals and the Mongols. Well aware of this, the People's Liberation Army men did their best to avoid trouble with the people and tried to educate them by deeds. It often happened that when they were crossing the desert or the grassland, marching in desolate mountains or in deep valleys, they were short of food, firewood and drinking water for days on end. The mouths of men and horses were parched from thirst; they smacked their lips which would turn even stickier than if they had eaten glue. But nobody complained. Sometimes they would be caught in a downpour. But they would rather expose themselves to rain than seek shelter in the houses of the local inhabitants. And the fighters would keep their spirits up with jokes. One would say, "You look like a wet chicken." And another would answer, "No, I'm not a chicken, I'm a dragon in the sea!" After two months of mopping-up operations in which the fighters fought day and night, they annihilated all the bandits. They captured what the bandits had looted from the people: lots of goods and chattels, cattle and sheep and a large number of horses.

The superior officers ordered their men to take charge of the people's property so that the owners might identify it. But the grooming of horses turned

out to be a regular headache to the soldiers. With these horses in hand, each man was given extra work. More fodder had to be prepared, the horses had to be fed, watered, exercised and rubbed down. Sick and wounded horses had to be drenched, given injections, their wounds had to be cleaned. Fortunately, at first each company only took care of what it had captured. Later, the horses were concentrated in one spot—four or five hundred in all. The Regimental Party Committee ordered the First Platoon of the Third Company to look after these horses. The platoon was instructed to give them enough fodder, to water and exercise them, to attend to the sick and wounded horses, and later to help their owners identify them. This, indeed, was a complicated job. Chang was then section leader and concurrently Party group leader in the platoon. Young as he was, he was a highly-principled man. He knew that these horses belonged to the people and that they should be returned to the people, and that any negligence in handling the horses would discredit the policy of the Party. To carry out this important task, he first called a meeting of all the Party members and Youth Leaguers in the platoon, urging them to strive for its fulfilment. The men would get up at the peep of dawn and gee-ho the horses to the pastures outside the city. In order to let the horses eat their fill without being disturbed, the men separated stallions from mares. The sick and wounded horses were led to spots where the grass was particularly tender and fresh, with a number of men appointed to look after them. At sunset, the horses—watered and exercised—were driven back. In the evening, the men would cut the grass which they had scythed in the day when they were grazing the horses in the pastures. They would first feed them carefully, one handful after another of grass, and then give them a mixture of grass and fodder. This made the horses eat heartily, and they

soon fattened. The men would make rounds of the stables, rape-seed oil lamp in hand, seeing to the comfort of the horses.

They would make use of what little time they had left to memorize the new characters they had learned. Sometimes, completely tired out, they would doze off right in the stable.

The horses recovered their health in less than twenty days. The coat of the sick and wounded horses began to turn glossy. The protruding bones and the hollows were covered with newly-grown flesh. There were among them quite a few really good horses, much better than those in the regiment. The cavalrymen would admiringly stroke their manes and pat their shiny backs. And the horses would neigh with delight when they saw the cavalrymen. Yes, even their disposition changed!

In Chang's section, there was a fighter named Wang Chien-ho. He was a valiant fighter, but quick-tempered. He would explode with anger at the slightest provocation, and just as quickly cool down. His sorrel mount had thick legs, uplifted ears and a broad chest. It was known for its swiftness and had been Wang's companion in many a battle. With the help of this horse, Wang had twice distinguished himself by performing meritorious service. The pity was that it was a mare! Now among the horses placed in Wang's charge, there happened to be a big sorrel stallion—with a long back and light and long legs—which could gallop like a flying dragon. Wang said to himself, "It would be splendid indeed if I could exchange my horse for this. . . ." Plucking up courage, he brought the matter up with his section leader.

"Change horses? That can never do!" Section Leader Chang replied firmly.

"Why not? A mare for a stallion, that's a fair

deal. When a peasant gets a mare, she produces foals, ploughs the field, and the peasant gets more when he sells her. But to me, a stallion is much more useful, since I have to fight bandits. . . ." Wang poured out what he had in mind in one breath.

"Your motive is all right. But have you forgotten the directive of the Regimental Party Committee—everything must be returned to the owner? This is the Party's policy, you can't just go your own way." Wang lapsed into silence. As a matter of fact, Wang was not the only comrade who had intended to change horses. So Section Leader Chang told Wang to criticize himself at one of the section meetings. After that, no one thought of changing horses.

All the people in Paiyinnao who had been robbed by the bandits came to identify their lost possessions. Goods and chattels were displayed in the eastern yard, while horses and other animals were rounded up in the western yard. Fur-lined coats, red and yellow robes, jewelry and hats—the things displayed in the eastern yard struck one as an exhibition of the crimes committed by the U.S.-supported Chiang Kai-shek bandits against the Mongols and Han nationals.

Those who had got back their lost clothes and other articles went to the western yard to claim their horses. Among them was a Mongolian girl with a parcel of recovered clothes under her arm, anxiously looking around for her father.

She was Ehdun Chichike,[1] a strapping girl with a round ruddy face, black eyebrows and eyelashes and sparkling eyes. Her whole stature and bearing were typical of a Mongolian girl. For six years, she had painstakingly tended horses for a landlord. A hard life of hunger and cold had aged her prematurely.

1 "Precious Flower" in the Mongolian language.

Though nineteen, she looked twenty-three. Finding her father in front of a pile of furniture, she went forward and tugged at him, saying, "Papa, let's go and look for our big white stallion!"

Her father, turning around and looking at her, answered, "Child, I haven't found my snuff-box yet!"

That meant waiting for him and the girl was impatient. So she handed him the parcel and said, "Take this, please. I'll go first." And off she dashed to the western yard. More than two hundred horses had been assembled there. There were Mongols, Hans and Huis among those who had come to identify their horses. They edged their way here and there among the horses. There was also a big crowd of onlookers. It was October, and a bitingly cold north wind was blowing along the U-bend of the Yellow River. But the people seemed to feel pretty warm. Some even sweat on their faces. Things—like getting their things back—never happened before! Together with others, Chichike moved round and round, smiling and sighing alternately, eagerly seeking out her big white stallion from among the horses. Her eyes ran from one white horse to another, but she failed to find her stallion. She was growing desperate. Just then, more than one hundred horses were driven into the yard through the gate. They were being herded back from the pasture where they had been watered. Their appearance created a stir. Those impatient of waiting rushed out of the gate and kept their eyes wide open as the horses approached the yard. Spotting their horses, they would jump forward, seize them by the mane and hurry into the yard shouting, "This is my seven-year-old horse, comrade! I was robbed of it at the Sun Temple." "Yes," others would back him, "this is his horse. Black coat and jade-like eyes." Some would recognize their lost animals the moment the latter were led into the yard. "That's mine!" one

owner would shout happily, and, all smiles, would lead his regained horse to the registrar. Chichike scanned these newly arrived horses one by one, but again failed to find her beloved white stallion. Vexed, she ran to the men in charge of the horses, "Comrades, are there any more? Why isn't my horse here?"

"There are still about eighty or ninety more grazing on the tender grass outside the town," a comrade with a registration book told her politely. "Some of them had been wounded by the bandits; others had been treated so badly, they became sick and skinny. They walk slowly. Don't you worry, you'll soon see them all."

Another comrade continued, "They are back already and are being fed in the backyard. So you needn't graze them on the way and can get home quickly. Please wait, they'll be brought here pretty soon."

"That's wonderful! The People's Liberation Army thinks of everything for us!" people said gratefully.

After a while, the sick and wounded horses were also brought into the yard. The people surged forward noisily. Chichike followed. Running her shining eyes over the horses, she found only twelve that resembled her lost horse in colour and height. She elbowed her way to the horses to take a good look at these twelve one by one, examining their characteristics and teeth. The first, a seven-year-old, was not hers. The second, which had a tuft of chestnut hair on its ear, was not hers either. Nor the third which had a dark-red birthmark about the size of a peach on its buttocks. Nor the fourth which resembled her lost stallion in all respects except that its forehoofs were a bit too small. Nor the fifth which was mottled with two streaks on its belly. She had thus examined ten horses, and still could lay claim to none of them. She went cold. Now there remained only two more white horses, standing in the northeastern corner of the yard. "If neither is mine,

that's the end," she thought. The next moment she tried to comfort herself, "No, things cannot turn out that way. One of them must be mine!"

She started walking towards the two white horses. Elbowing her way through, she would now push a man, then bump into a horse, but she paid no heed. While still at some distance, she caught sight of one of the two horses whose coat and height looked exactly like those of her stallion. "This horse is certainly mine!" her heart beat faster. She came still nearer and looked. Yes, it was a stallion. Chichike chuckled. Then she took the halter of the horse to look closely at the nether jaw and found a knot of yellowish hair. She knit her eyebrows, her heart sank. She uttered, "Good gracious! Again not mine!" Dazed and exhausted, she only managed somehow to look obliquely at the last white horse. It stood there listless, with its head hanging down and its hoofs as if riveted to the ground. A short uneven mane covered its neck, and there were two slit-like scars on its croup. Chichike didn't need to come any closer to examine it carefully, for she could tell from where she was that it was definitely not her horse. Her stallion always held his head high and wagged his bushy tail happily, and his hoofs ceaselessly scratched the ground. Besides, he had a handsome even mane and his coat was glossy and smooth, as clean as it could be. Completely disheartened, she simply could not pull herself together to look closely at the horse. Her ruddy face turned white. She stood there, stupified, staring blankly at the horses. Nobody could tell what she was thinking about.

It was afternoon. The hum of human voices had gradually died away. Almost all the people had found their lost horses. Some were leading three or five horses, others one or two. There were horses of all

colours: bay, black, white. . . . They passed to and fro before her eyes.

"Only the People's Liberation Army can help us get back our horses!"

"They're indeed worthy pupils of Chairman Mao!"

These remarks were prompted by the people's feeling of heartfelt gratitude. They asked one another where they had bought their horses and how they had brought them up. Their hearts were filled with joy. But to Chichike, these words went into one ear and came out of the other. Her thoughts were with her lovely Ehdun Maole. She recalled how she held him in her arms, guided him and brushed his soft and shiny hair when he was still a colt; how she fed him and curried his mane as he grew and how he carried her tearing across the steppe. She also remembered the day she was chased by the Kuomintang bandits and how he galloped. . . . But her pet stallion was definitely lost! The more she thought of him, the sadder she felt and the more indignant she became with the Chiang Kai-shek bandits. Her eyes swelled with tears.

The registrar looked around the yard and found the girl standing there forlorn, wiping away the tears with her sleeves. He already guessed her trouble. So he stepped forward, asking amiably, "What's the trouble? Can't find your horse?" She hung her head low, too sad to speak. The registrar came nearer. "Is it because you haven't found your horse?" he repeated, his voice sounding even more friendly.

Chichike raised her head and glanced at the inquirer before she replied, "Yes."

"Where was your horse stolen?"

The girl wiped away her tears and was about to answer when her father elbowed his way through the crowd and, approaching her, said, "Child, I have found our horse." The unexpected news stunned her. With

dilated eyes, she asked sceptically, "Have you really found it, papa? Where?"

"Of course. Look, it's there!" The old man pointed to the gate where a big white stallion stood with a load of grass on his back. "I've looked all over the place," the old man continued, "I could find neither you nor the horse. Somebody told me you were here, so I came this way. At the gate, I saw a white horse carrying a load of grass. As luck would have it, it turned out to be our horse!" She stood on tiptoe, craned her neck and saw a white horse, holding its head erect, its handsome long mane hanging evenly from its neck, its tail wagging.... "Oh, yes, it's our horse!" she shouted in ecstasy, making for the horse. The people in the yard turned round, their attention drawn by the big white horse.

Section Leader Chang and Wang Chien-ho had just come back from the pasture. Both were carrying large sheaves of grass on their shoulders as the evening feed for the remaining horses. Chang put down the grass and was about to unload the white horse when Chichike approached and said,

"Yes, hurry up and take off the load. This is my horse."

Section Leader Chang gave a start. Then he remembered that near the gate they had been approached by an old man who was patting their horse and saying with a smile, "This is our horse." So excited was the old man that he had overlooked the threshold and tripped over it, falling on his hip. Chang lost no time in helping him to his feet. Then, having entered the yard, Chang was about to explain to the old man that this had always been his own war-horse and not one of those taken back from the bandits, but the old man was already gone. Chang was greatly puzzled. It was not until he saw the old man standing beside the girl that

he understood that the old man had gone to look for this girl. Slowly taking off the grass from the back of the horse, Chang said mildly, "Look, dear comrade, I'm afraid you have made a mistake. This is my horse, given me for my use by our superior officers. . . ."

"Given you by your superior officers?" the old man interrupted Chang. "Why, this is the horse brought up by my daughter."

By this time, many people had gathered around. Wang Chien-ho, seeing that the old man was insisting that the horse was his, hastened to help his comrade explain. "You're mistaken, comrade. This horse was given to Section Leader Chang two years ago in Changpei County."

"Pooh! As sure as I live and breathe, this is the horse brought up by my daughter. How can I be mistaken there?" Saying so, the old man turned to the people around, "My fellow villagers will recognize it too. . . ." Then he stepped forward and stroked the long and neat mane, observing, "Just look at the mane. . . ." He opened the horse's mouth and added, "Look, just eight years old! And this long tail touching the ground. . . . I'm sure it's our horse! . . ."

One of the villagers standing near backed him, "To bring up the horse, the girl had indeed worked her head off!"

Tired from carrying back the grass, Wang Chien-ho was perspiring freely. He was thirsty and intended to get some water in the kitchen. The obstinacy of the old man was sorely trying his fiery temper. But he did his best to remain calm and said, "I've already told you, this horse isn't yours! Chairman Mao's soldiers don't cheat!"

"But it *is* mine," the old man insisted, vexed, pointing his finger at the sky. "Do you think I'm working a racket on you in broad daylight?"

The word "racket" stung Wang to the quick. "Yes, you *are* working a racket on our Section Leader Chang," Wang exploded. "You minority nationals have no right to be unreasonable. I say you're as tricky as bandits!"

The last sentence hit the old man on the raw and he thundered at the top of his voice, "We, Mongols, always call a spade a spade, and say what we mean. You say we are unreasonable and tricky! You even call me a bandit! How could a bandit have helped you arrest Chiamusu[1]?. . ." With that, he headed for Wang and it looked as if they would come to blows. The people around made haste to put in a word to pacify them.

Seeing that the situation was taking an ugly turn, Chang called out, "Wang Chien-ho!" Blinking, Wang became silent. Chang hastened to add smilingly, "Old uncle, don't get angry. This comrade of ours is a spitfire. If you've got anything to say, just say it plainly. We're the people's army, everything can be straightened out in a proper way."

"That's it. You're the troops of the Communist Party. You wanted us to identify our horses. Now I've found it, but why do you refuse to give it back to me?" The old man sputtered away in a huff.

The cavalrymen, realizing things had come to a deadlock, also hurried over to speak up for Section Leader Chang. One of them fetched a cup of tea for the old man, saying, "Comrade! Take a cup of tea to calm yourself, and then let's talk it over again."

Chichike was standing on the side, lost in deep thought, "There is no doubt that this is my horse, but they say otherwise. What's the matter? Are there men in the People's Liberation Army who refuse to listen to reason? Don't they belong to the same army which fought the bandits the other day?" This very

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1 A bandit leader.

thought about the soldiers who had fought the bandits made her feel uneasy. Had it not been for that detachment of the People's Liberation Army that came to her rescue, she would have been killed by the bandits. Ever since the day she was saved, her old father daily prayed to Buddha for this wonderful army.... With these thoughts in mind, she felt it was indeed too much for her father to lose temper. So she nudged her father, "Don't get upset, papa!"

Section Leader Chang had indeed got himself into a scrape. He said to himself, "The old man has mistaken this horse for his and has lost his temper. We, the People's Liberation Army, should never forget that we are dealing with the people. I've explained to him, but he just turns a deaf ear to my words and insists he is right."

At this juncture, the leader of the Third Platoon appeared on the scene. Chang told him what had happened but the latter at first was also at a loss. Then he suggested, "Well, why not check up all the horses here once more?"

The old man, however, refused, "What for? I've looked at every white horse here. Don't think I'm too old. I've still got a perfect eyesight. I know this horse like the palm of my hand!"

One of the cavalrymen proposed a compromise, "There are four or five hundred horses here. You can make your choice and take one similar to yours. These horses belong to you folks after all. We don't want to keep them for ourselves."

Some of the onlookers also agreed to the idea and urged the old man, "Yes, that should do."

The old man retorted, foaming at the mouth, "I will never do that. I won't take one that doesn't belong to me, not even a gold horse, let alone an ordinary animal!"

Chang was about to say something when Wang

Chien-ho broke in to reject the idea, "That won't do! You let him take away any horse he thinks fit, but what if the real owner of the horse should turn up? We can't follow him in making mistakes!"

The old man, seeing Wang speak up again, became mad and pulled his daughter, "All right. Since they refuse to give us the horse, let's go home!"

"Wait a bit, papa!" she held fast to her father. Feeling she had been wronged, she looked at the white horse and broke into tears.

Ill at ease, Section Leader Chang also felt he was being wronged. Thinking of the arduous mopping-up operation against the bandits, of the comrades-in-arms fallen on the battlefield, and of the world of trouble he had taken in looking after, feeding, watering, inoculating and drenching these horses, he could not help asking himself, "What have we been doing this for? These people don't understand us at all!" But, on second thoughts, he corrected himself, "All this is quite natural. Otherwise, why would we call the place a newly-liberated area? Now this old man still insists on his demand and it looks like the people around also believe him. It can't be straightened out by a mere explanation. What can I do to convince the old man of his mistake?" With knitted eyebrows, Chang paced to and fro nervously. Suddenly his eyes sparkled with an idea and he turned to Chichike, "Since you've brought the horse up, you must have a name for it."

"Certainly."

"Fine! I've got a name for my horse, too!" Then he turned to the people around, "Look here. Here's a way out. Now since both horses have names of their own, it's easy for us to settle the whole matter. Folks, when we both call it by name, it will respond either to me, or to her." Chang turned to Chichike, "Then we'll know whose horse this is."

"Good idea!" Chichike's face lit up. She was so sure of the outcome that she said confidently, "You may call out first!"

"Let's do it together," Chang said, self-possessed and quite certain of success. The local people were apprehensive for Chang's sake, and the cavalrymen were expecting a defeat for the girl. All the eyes were focused on the snow-white steed.

"You just look!" Chichike said in high spirits. "It'll hold up its head and walk towards me at my call. That means it has responded, inviting me to mount it." But she was cut short by the cavalrymen.

"Don't talk any more, just call out!" they urged.

And the two bawled out simultaneously,

"Ehdun Maole! Ehdun Maole!"

"Snow White! Snow White!"

"Snow White!"

"Ehdun Maole!"

The white stallion held its head high, shook its mane and then looked about. Ah, he was walking ahead! But he walked towards Section Leader Chang and not towards Chichike. "Hurrah!" the cavalrymen clapped their hands joyously. Chichike buried her face in her hands in shame.... But the white horse with the slit-like scars on its croup, standing in the north-eastern corner of the yard, suddenly pricked up its ears at the call of the girl. It held up its head, looked at the crowd, and, at the sight of the girl, jerked its head, wagged its tail and ran towards her!

Everyone was dumbfounded, but this was followed by a burst of laughter and people said, "Ah, that's yours." Section Leader Chang also grinned. The cavalrymen applauded all the more loudly. The old man stood in the crowd, his face changing colour all the time.

Chichike clasped the horse's head with both hands

and examined it closely. The animal licked her hands and her shoulder with the warmth and familiarity through which she could easily identify her own horse. Yet just a while back she had not been able to bring herself to believe it, because the horse had changed beyond recognition. "You've been wounded, you don't look like your former self," she said. Caressing its scars, the savagely shorn uneven mane and the tail which had been clipped short and was now thin, she felt so sad she began to cry. Then she raised her head, her eyes filled with sadness and shame. She glanced about and, seeing Section Leader Chang, said, "This is my horse. How did it come to look like this?" This question brought a forgotten scene to Chang's mind. As though suddenly awake to the secret of the puzzle, he said, "We've misunderstood each other for quite a while. I didn't know that this horse was yours. My knowledge may be limited in other respects, but I know how this horse has become like this, because it was captured by us...." Then he began the story of the capture of this horse:

"On August 5, we received a report that about one hundred bandits had entered Paiyinnao and Chiacha Village. Our company was ordered to set off immediately to fight these bandits. After covering more than fifty *li* in the desert, our horses became dead tired. Moreover, the grassland was full of creepers over which our horses were continuously tripping. We would have overtaken the bandits had it not been for a stream which barred our way. The bandits waded across the stream and several were carried away by the current. Those who had crossed the stream were desperately lashing at their horses and sniping at us. Without even bothering to take off our clothes, we waded neck-deep through two streams. It was a hard job! After the crossing, we continued in hot pursuit of the enemy. We

chased after the bandits until they were caught in a ravine, and then they surrendered. But we saw a bandit on a white horse galloping away over a mountain ridge and turning around to shoot at us again and again. Eager to get at him, we did not take cover and drove our horses right after him. Then the white horse suddenly bucked and threw the bandit into a ditch. But the fugitive continued to resist." Here Section Leader Chang raised his left hand, saying, "Look here, folks. This scar on the back of my hand is the result of a wound inflicted by that fellow."

The listeners, deeply touched, concentrated their attention on Chang's hand. Chichike was moved beyond description, her eyes filled with tears.

Chang, drawing a breath, continued,

"We caught that bandit. The damned fellow turned out to be a so-called regimental commander. The white horse had been stabbed in the neck and its croup had received two sabre cuts and was bleeding badly. We didn't use sabres, and therefore these wounds had not been inflicted by us. Then how did this horse get wounded? This was not clarified until one of the captives told us that the bandit regimental commander had chased a Mongolian girl, and, overtaking her, tried to rape her. But she resisted with all her might, and there was a struggle. The horse neighed and kicked. The bandit thought the girl was dead and robbed her of her hat, purple robe, yellow sash, sabre and boots. . . ." Here Chang paused.

At this point, Chichike shivered with horror, and it looked as if she would faint.

Chang looked uneasy, but went on, "We caught up with him. He hastily told another bandit to take the girl's white horse, but it refused to move, and they lashed it savagely. On the way, the bandit regimental commander's own horse was killed by us and he leapt

into the saddle of the white horse. The horse bucked and curveted, and he fell on the ground. He was mad and, drawing his sabre, he struck it viciously twice in the croup. We were catching up with him, so he had to mount the horse again and drove it in an attempt to save his life....

"We were led by our captives to a valley where we found a girl lying sprawled in a buckwheat field. She was lying unconscious, bleeding profusely and covered with mud. She had been beaten beyond recognition and was groaning weakly. Poor girl!

"We dismounted. I fumbled for a package of pills in my pocket and stuffed some into her mouth and then unplugged my flask and poured a few mouthfuls of water down her throat. And this comrade Wang Chien-ho fished out a uniform from the kitbag attached to the saddle of his horse and dressed her."

Here Wang interposed, "You covered her with a woollen blanket."

Chang nodded, "Yes, but we didn't know which village this girl was from. We were worrying about it when the government work team that had followed the army appeared, and we handed her over to them...."

Chichike's face changed colour and tears streamed down her cheeks. Her shoulders heaved, her eyes stared blankly and she opened and shut her mouth no longer able to control herself, "Comrade Section Leader Chang! You've saved my life! Ah, it's you comrades who have saved me! At last, I've found my saviours!" She went over, seized Chang by the arm, and unable to speak, she broke into tears. The old man, hanging down his head and wringing his hands, felt ashamed of his outburst against Chang, and his face grew pale and red in turn.

The local people voiced their gratitude.

The cavalrymen stared at the girl. Her look spoke of deep gratitude. Tears were still dropping incessantly.

"Ah, it was you who were so muddy and blood-stained!" Wang blurted out. "You should know how we've looked after your horse! When we took it back, it refused to eat and drink. For three days and nights, we took turns attending to it. We changed its dressings and gave it injections...."

Section Leader Chang bashfully turned to Chichike, "Don't cry. We've come to liquidate the bandits so that you folks may lead a happy life!"

Chichike took her hands off Chang and wiped away her tears. She looked at the horse, and, when she realized that even the animal had thrown the hated bandit off its back, she caressed the scars on its croup. A gust of northerly wind made her shiver. Her father immediately unwrapped the parcel, "Darling, take care lest you catch cold. Put on these." She began putting on the purple robe, yellow sash and hat which had been returned to her in the morning. The white stallion which had often seen his mistress in this costume, now appeared even more friendly and tried to get closer to her. It suddenly occurred to Chichike that she had not ridden her "Ehdun Maole" for many, many days. She adroitly leapt into the saddle and called, "Ehdun Maole!" The horse instantly raised its head, pricked up its ears and wagged its tail. Crest-fallen only a moment before this, Ehdun Maole turned out to be a spirited animal. Pressed in its sides by her heels, the horse braced itself and started trotting in the yard. The girl on horseback looked cheerfully at the people and then at Section Leader Chang, her big dark eyes sparkling with unusual excitement.

And then, with a swish, Section Leader Chang swung into the saddle of his Snow White. He reined

it with his left hand and then made the horse run a few paces to keep abreast of Ehdun Maole. The two horses cantered neck and neck. . . . The people in the yard fixed their eyes upon these two horses and their riders. They applauded joyfully.

The old man shook hands with Wang Chien-ho and sincerely apologized. "Young man, I'm old and have a nasty temper. I'm afraid I've hurt your feelings." Then, looking down, he shook his head and sighed regretfully. The old man's straightforward Mongolian character did not fail to move even Wang. He firmly grasped the old man's hands and shook them warmly, remarking, "You're way off on that, old uncle. I'm ill-tempered, too. I'm young and know no manners, please don't take it to heart."

The flaming rays of the setting sun bathed the people and the horses in the yard.

In the refulgent red light, Chichike, sitting firmly in the saddle and her face rubicund, looked more charming than ever. The people cheered as she raised her arm, held up her thumb and shouted,

"Chairman Mao's *Alatan Chijihke!*[1]"

"Chairman Mao's Mongolian *Alatan Chijihke!*"

"Paokoting Chijihke!"[2]

"Paokoting Chijihke!"

"Chairman Mao's *Alatan Chijihke!*"

The cheers of those present sounded like a torrent rushing down from the mountain.

A photographer from the division headquarters happened to be present on the spot. He photographed the scene and took a snapshot of Section Leader Chang and Chichike, side by side on horseback.

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1 "Gold-like army" in the Mongolian language.

2 "Buddha-like army" in the Mongolian language.

Later, Chang was elected Combat Hero and Model Horse-tender and was invited to attend the division victory meeting, at which he came across the photographer again. And the latter gave him a photograph as a souvenir. That was how Chang came by that picture.

April 1953

Sacrifice to the Kitchen God

by Chin Chao-yang

Chin Chao-yang was born in 1916 in Huangkang County, Hupeh Province. After graduation from normal school, he taught in a primary school for one year. In 1938, he came to the northern Shensi revolutionary base and contributed his efforts as an artist. In 1943, he went to the villages of the central Hopei plain to take part in organizational work among the masses. It was there, in the midst of bitter struggles, that he thought of representing these struggles in literary form. He began writing short stories in 1946.

"Sacrifice to the Kitchen God" originally appeared in a collection of his short stories "Village Vignettes."

At present, the author is one of the editors of the monthly "People's Literature" published in Peking.

On the twenty-third of the twelfth lunar month, I was in Lungwan Village to inspect the work of helping poor army dependents during the New Year Festival. I stayed in the home of one of them—Aunt Chou. There were three others in her family—a daughter-in-law, a fourteen-year-old grand-daughter, and a son. It was eleven years since the son joined the army. Later, he volunteered for the Korean front, where he is now a battalion commander.

I had stayed in Aunt Chou's home on three previous occasions, so we were old friends. Aunt Chou always had the welcome mat out for revolutionary cadres, and her daughter-in-law Tsui-lan was the vice-chairman of the village women's association. I therefore felt quite at home in their family circle during this Lunar New Year season.

As I stepped into the courtyard, Aunt Chou, on

hearing my footsteps, peered out of the window and cried:

"Chin, so you've come! I was just about to send somebody to bring you a message. We took your advice and tore down the old store-room—and what a treasure we found! Come in, quick, and I'll show you."

I entered the room and saw the family making meat dumplings on the *kang*.[1] The little girl Chen bounced down from the *kang* and snatched something from behind the mirror on the table.

"Take a look. What's this?"

I looked. It was a photograph, faded and yellowed as if it had been immersed in tea dregs—the picture of a man, blurred beyond recognition. A corner of the photograph was marred by a round hole the size of a thumb-print, as if it had been burnt through.

"Whose picture is this?" I asked.

"First climb on to the *kang* and warm yourself," said Aunt Chou, "and I'll tell you."

I got on the *kang* and began helping with the meat dumplings. Tsui-lan wanted to make some tea for me, and I had a hard time talking her out of it. At last I succeeded, and Aunt Chou started her story.

"It was in 1947. The Kuomintang troops made a hell out of this region. That photo is of little Chen's father. Less than three months after Chen received it in the mail, things got a bit hot, and she slid the photo between some books which she stuffed into the grate of the *kang*. One day, in barged three Kuomintang soldiers. They ransacked the place and were just about to search the grate when Chen, who was staring with her heart in her throat, bent over the grate. Small of body but quick of limb, she grabbed the books and ran. One of the swine chased her. Just as she got to the courtyard

1 See footnote 2 on page 4.

entrance and was turning to slip out through the gate, he fired. The bullet hit the books and grazed the skin off her leg. It quite nearly scared the wits out of the little one! She didn't realize then what had happened, but scurried into the courtyard next door and shoved the photo into a pile of kindling. When that hoodlum caught up with her, he saw she held only a few books in her hands, so he gave her a couple of slaps and swore at her, then went off. The child just lay on the ground, paralysed with fright...."

Aunt Chou stopped, apparently finished. The little girl took up the recital.

"Afterwards, my mother said, 'Take good care of this photo as a keepsake to show your father when he comes home, so he'll know what trouble the people have gone through!' We hid the picture in the grain store-room—the very room you talked about."

Tsui-lan's hands, accustomed to the labour of the fields, made meat dumplings with great dexterity and speed. Now she too chimed in with a laugh:

"After liberation, we went to the store-room to get some grain out of one of the jars, and I said we ought to look for the photograph. Chen said it was in a wooden box buried in a corner of the wall. We dug it up and it turned out to be full of her books—but no photo! I was so disgusted I scolded her until she cried. Then, the day we tore down the store-room—guess what? The picture was wedged into a crack in the wall! Chin, if it weren't for your suggestion, we wouldn't have found it yet!"

A fortnight ago, I had stayed over at Aunt Chou's and noticed that bags and jugs of flour and grain were stacked up at the head of the *kang* and on the cupboard, making the little room very cramped. Then I learned that there had originally been a store-room in the corner of the house between the wood shed and the milling

shed. Long before, when things had got pretty hard, they had sealed up the door with earth and covered it with a plaster of mud. This completely hid it from view and prevented the enemy from seizing the grain. After liberation, the little entrance was broken open. But the store-room could not really be called a room; it was a mere nook.

This year, after the household had joined a mutual-aid team, Tsui-lan's five *mou*[1] of maize had yielded a bumper crop, and their other plots had also come out with extra yields of 10 to 20 per cent. There was not enough room for all the grain. I told them that grain harvests would increase from year to year, and storage would become a still bigger problem. I suggested that they tear down the old store-room and enlarge it. Taking my advice, they found the picture when they started the work.

Aunt Chou suddenly chuckled. "This business of the photograph brings something else to my mind. At that time, Chen was only eight years old. One day, she asked me, 'Grandma, lots of other kids' daddies who go off to join the Eighth Route Army send home their pictures. How come my daddy doesn't? We ought to write him for one!' I told her, 'Child, you've grown to be the very image of your papa. To look at you is to see him. What do we need a photo for?' Just see, in the twinkling of an eye, the child has become a grown-up!"

Chen, doing her share of the pastry, lifted her eyes and said with a smile, "Comrade Chin, know what? Mama says we must send the photograph to Korea to remind my father how the people used to suffer, so that he'll fight the American invaders all the harder!"

1 One *mou* is equal to one-sixth of an acre.

Tsui-lan flushed with embarrassment on hearing these words, and glared at Chen.

"You little monster! You must repeat everything, mustn't you?"

"Didn't you tell me so yourself?" Chen retorted petulantly, shaking her locks.

Tsui-lan energetically slapped a meat dumpling on to the slatted bamboo tray and said:

"Little imp, all you know is how to use a mischievous tongue! You've got a few years of schooling in your head, but you're a long way from writing the way you should!"

Abashed, Chen giggled, and the conversation shifted to something else. It was turning dark and Aunt Chou got off the *kang* to light the lamps and went into the next room to cook supper. Chen continued in a teasing vein:

"Mama, I don't care if you are a cadre of the women's association, but can you talk grandma out of sacrificing to the Kitchen God?[1] Do you know, she didn't tell us that she bought a catty of candied melon. It's for sacrificing to the Kitchen God for sure. Only I didn't see her buy a Kitchen God. I've looked everywhere but I can't find it."

"There are no Kitchen Gods for sale in the market now. These days, there are so few buyers that they don't sell at all." Tsui-lan spoke earnestly. She seemed to be pondering over something. After a while, she turned to me and said, "Chin, supposing you reason with

1 It was customary in these parts to sacrifice to the Kitchen God on the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month with candied melon, a sweet made out of malt sugar in the shape of a melon. The candy was calculated to gum up the Kitchen God's lips with its glutinous stickiness, so that when he went to heaven he would not report anything bad about the household. The "Kitchen Gods" sold in the shops were coloured woodcuts.

her? It's no good our talking. Still superstitious in this day and age! Every year I try to persuade her, but it does no good!"

At this moment, Aunt Chou lifted the door screen and came hobbling into the room.

"What are you, mother and daughter, muttering about? I heard it all!" she cried, but with no trace of annoyance in her voice. With that, she climbed on the *kang,* took up her pipe and lit it from the flame of the lamp.

Tsui-lan and her daughter knew that the old lady would now start a lengthy harangue. They waited, suppressing their smiles.

After she finished a pipe, Aunt Chou finally spoke:

"You young folks, what do you know about your older generation's affairs? When I was a girl, scrubbing pots and pans and cooking every day in the kitchen, I'd get worried every time I glanced at the Kitchen God over the stove. It sounds funny, but there wasn't anything I feared more than that the old fellow might think I was wasting food and so get me matched up with some lout of an idiot. Don't you snicker, it's true. All my life I never dared to waste any food when cooking. Afterwards, I got married—true he wasn't an idiot, only poor. Year after year, I sacrificed to the Kitchen God, praying away: "Venerable Kitchen God, venerable Kitchen God, hasten up to heaven, hasten down to earth. Carry away bad luck, bring fortune and joy, propitious wind and rain, harvests of bounty, granaries overflowing, peace among men, all as it should be, all to the heart's desire. . . ."

At this point, even Aunt Chou could no longer contain herself and burst into laughter. Everyone else was breathless with uproarious mirth, shaking the room until the shadows danced.

Aunt Chou refilled her pipe and continued. "Every

year we said our prayers, every year we kowtowed, banging our heads loudly. You can't imagine how it is—just as if there were really a pale-faced, long-bearded god before your eyes, your heart feels so tight with anxiety! That's how we passed over two score years of our life, but every year we were just as poor as ever. Then, during the trouble with Japan, the Eighth Route Army came in and told everybody to get rid of their superstition. But you've no idea—the rougher the times were, the more anxious you were, the more you put your heart into sacrificing to the Kitchen God on the night of the twenty-third. On top of all that, little Chen's father going off to fight the Japanese. . . . Ah, I don't have to tell you. Then came the land reform. Everybody said, 'We worshipped gods all our lives, but never a grain of food dropped from heaven. Now, as soon as Chairman Mao takes the lead, we get land'—and there's a lot to that. But isn't it odd—every year, as soon as the twelfth month rolls around, I say to myself, 'No more sacrifices this year; what nonsense to believe in!' But then, right after the twentieth of the month, I start feeling that it's just not right, that not to sacrifice to the Kitchen God would be like committing a crime, like losing something. You, Tsui-lan, you reason with me every year, and it isn't that I don't listen to you. I . . . ah, I shut my eyes, and right away see a vision of a pale-faced, long-bearded god. . . . Just think—over sixty years of that kind of life. It's no easy matter to change all of a sudden!"

"Grandma, now that you see things straight, are you going to sacrifice this year or not?" Chen asked puckishly, lifting her little face.

"This year, away with any sacrifice!" Aunt Chou said firmly, knocking her pipe hard against the edge of the *kang.*

"Good! Wonderful! Wonderful!" Chen began clapping her hands.

"Monkey! Less nonsense!" Tsui-lan was afraid that the grandmother would be nettled, and tried to hold Chen back.

"Let her be happy; she deserves to be," Aunt Chou said laughingly. "I was an old muddle-head. Just think, if it weren't for the cadres and their leadership getting the mutual-aid teams set up and the women to join in work in the fields, if it weren't for my daughter-in-law becoming progressive, do you suppose we could have reaped so much grain this autumn? This year, that old pale-faced, long-bearded god can go up to heaven on his own. I won't be there to send him off!"

"Mother, you really mean it?" asked Tsui-lan, flushed with happy excitement.

"Why shouldn't I mean what I say?" Aunt Chou clapped her hands. "I'll get the candied melon and you all eat it up!" She actually got off the *kang* and rummaged among the pots and jars atop the cupboard and brought out a paper bag which she placed on the *kang*.

"Take some! The child can get clever lips for school from eating it, grown-ups can get clever hands to write letters to the child's father, cadres can get clever minds to serve the masses!"

Everyone laughed.

Tsui-lan said, "Look at mother! What a glib talker she is now!"

Aunt Chou chuckled and went back to tending the fire at the grate.

After supper, the whole family carried on with the meat dumplings. Fatigued from a day's walking I retired to the western room, intending to read a bit and then go to bed. Aunt Chou came in to light the *kang* fire for me. She had scarcely put in a few sticks of kindling when she went out again and didn't come back.

By this time, the whole village had finished supper. Along the street came children's shouts and laughter and exploding fire-crackers in bursts of sound. All of a sudden my thoughts flashed back to a scene of many years ago. It was in 1943, the most difficult period in the war against Japan. A great change had come over this region and we could only carry out our operations after dark. Also on the night of the twenty-third of the twelfth lunar month, a band of us "night patrollers" stealthily passed through the streets of an enemy-occupied village. About every hundred paces there hung a string of red lanterns on which were written the words "Happy Land of the Emperor's Way" or "East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere"—What hideous eye-sores! . . .

I decided to go out into the street to have a look, and had just stepped out of my door when I caught sight of Aunt Chou standing in the dark courtyard. She had her hands clasped and was mumbling:

". . . If you really exist, Kitchen God, you'd better go back to heaven and stay there this time, because it's no use your coming down again—not even your picture is being sold now. People don't believe in you nowadays. You don't count. . . ."

At this point, the door of the eastern room burst open and out jumped Chen, like a little monkey, laughing and shrieking:

"Grandma, ha ha ha ha . . . you're a scream! You'll make us die of laughter!"

"Ha ha ha ha! . . ." From behind the door Tsui-lan's laughter could also be heard.

Aunt Chou did not get angry, nor did she laugh. She only walked slowly into the eastern room. Chen ran over to me, made a mischievous grimace and also went back to the eastern room. For a long time mother

and daughter could still be heard laughing in fits and starts.

After a bit, Aunt Chou's voice said softly, "Quit laughing, will you? If Chin hears, he'll make fun of us." But the little girl couldn't stop giggling.

I stood outside my door and looked up at the sky thickly studded with bright stars. I heard something fly quietly skywards. It wasn't the Kitchen God, but little Chen's crystal-clear, tinkling laughter, to tell the stars how man, by his own strength, had brought about change never before known in history. . .

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